

**1958
EASTER
BLOCK
FIRE**



JOHAN HENDRICK MILLIGER
ROBERT HENRY JOHNSTON
GEORGE MCCORKILL
JOHN FRANCIS WILTSHIRE-BUTLER

WHO PERISHED IN A BUSHFIRE
IN THE COURSE OF DUTY
WITH THE FORESTS DEPT
ON

2ND JANUARY 1958

Profile of a Wildfire

The story of the Easter Brook Bushfire tragedy of January 1958

By Dave Evans

This fire was the result of an outbreak from an “advance burn” which had been carried out by the Forests Department on 2nd December 1957, which had been deemed to be extinguished.

It was customary for the Department at the time to carry out advance burning in jarrah forest prior to logging of the area taking place. The purpose is to remove scrub and heavy forest debris to provide the fallers and bush workers easier access, and to remove fuel from the forest floor in case of a fire being started accidentally during logging activities.

At that time the Forests Department had only just adopted a policy of broad acre prescribed burning, so most of the forest where burns were now being done carried very heavy fuels. This meant that the initial burns were usually lit under very mild conditions and were consequently quite light and patchy.

This particular burn covered an area of approximately 1200 hectares, bordered by Hopkins Road on the north, Easter Road on the east, Dickson Road on the south, and Sands Road on the west. The area was patrolled after the burn on the 3rd and 4th of December and appeared to be safe.

However, the burn was effective only around the edges of the area to a depth varying from a few chains (50 to 60 metres) to about a kilometre. Areas of the forest in the centre of the block were unburned. When the Prohibited Burning Period commenced a general prohibition on further lighting began, ensuring no further action could be taken until after the first rains in autumn.

On the morning of 11th December the Dickson Fire Lookout tower reported a small smoke in the south west corner of the block, but it did not develop and no action was taken.

A further small smoke, which also died out, was reported from the same general direction on the morning of 12th December.

Approximately three weeks later, at 11:15 on 1st January 1958, a small white smoke was reported in the same area by Dickson Tower. As the tower was less than 2 kilometres away from the original burn, any earlier smokes could not have escaped detection.

The forecast fire hazard for the day was for High Summer, with north-east to south-east winds, varying southerly during the day, indicating a cool, moist late afternoon and evening. Such a change could be expected to assist in controlling a fire.

At 11:30 am the only two men available from Barlee Brook settlement were instructed to make an inspection on the ground. At 2:00pm Ogilvie, the man in charge, reported that the area was alight, covered about a hectare, and was burning freely.

There was no radio communication available in the field at that time. The only communication possible was the single line (earth return circuit) bush telephone system with a phone at Dickson Tower. From this phone, calls to Nannup headquarters were possible.

The gang from Willow Springs settlement comprising Raymond Thomas (22), James McCrone (30), Kevin Joseph Barrett (25), John Talbot (Jr), Overseer William Riising and three of the men who died in the inferno, John Hilliger (37), Robert Johnson (30), George McCorkhill (64) and John Wiltshire-Butcher (37), under Assistant Forester John Talbot (54) were despatched to carry out suppression operations. They set up a base and at 4:00pm commenced their task of raking a trail around the perimeter of the fire.

However, the men experienced greater difficulty than had been anticipated, and at 7:00pm A/F Talbot reported to Nannup office from the phone at Dickson Tower that he would require more men and a bulldozer to complete a break around the fire. He then withdrew the gang to Hopkins Road to a meal and rest. They re-commenced their work after 8:00pm, raking down the eastern perimeter of the fire.

In the cooler atmosphere of the night the fire died down, the fire face became difficult to follow, and cut-off segments would not burn when attempts were made to light them. Recognising the futility of continuing in the dark A/F Talbot withdrew the gang and settled the men on the road at midnight to rest until dawn when the attack would be renewed with the additional men he had requested.

After receiving A/F Talbot's telephone request, Assistant Divisional Forest Officer Ian Morrison at Nannup organised for the Barlee Brook gang to proceed to join Talbot, and requested a bulldozer from the Manjimup office.

Following a break of some four hours, the Willows Springs gang recommenced work at 4:30 am, joined by the Barlee Brook gang which had arrived at about 2:00 am. The newly arrived gang worked around the western side of the fire with the intention of joining forces around it on the southern side. These two gangs made good progress at first, but by 6:00 am the fire began to lift and at 8:15 am, Talbot reported by phone that he had not surrounded the fire and needed more men.

The forecast for that day, Thursday, 2nd January, given at 7:15 am, was for a fire hazard of "severe, approaching dangerous" upgraded from the "high summer" forecast of the previous two days. It also predicted "moderate to fresh northeast to southeast wind and an afternoon sea breeze". Evidently the Weather Bureau did not expect the trough of low pressure lying off the west coast at the time to pass inland that day with the dangerous weather and strong northwest winds which usually accompanies such a weather pattern.

In response to the 7:15am revised weather forecast and the 8:15 am report of A/F Talbot, ADFO Morrison organised further gangs, bulldozers and power pumper units from Nannup, Glenoran (Manjimup Division) and Jarraewood (Kirup Division). A/F Talbot was instructed to return to Willow Springs to obtain food and supplies for his men.

Talbot rang ahead to Willow Springs to have wives prepare these requirements and returned about 10:45 am bringing an additional two men, Vallentine and Johnston with him.

On his arrival Talbot found that the fire was burning strongly, and the men had withdrawn to the truck at the roadside.

District Forester Oscar Pears had left Nannup immediately after Talbot's 8:15 telephone call to inspect the area and assess the overall situation as he was the officer most familiar with that section of forest. He surveyed the fire area from the conveniently positioned Dickson Tower then travelled along Easter and Dickson Roads sketching the very inadequate burn by the December 2nd fire along the southern and eastern perimeters of the block. On returning to Dickson Tower he notified Nannup, by bush telephone, that he would withdraw the men from Hopkins Road and set up a control point at the junction of Easter and Dickson Roads.

After a meal, the Willow Springs and Barlee Brook gangs were moved to the selected control point arriving about midday where they were joined shortly afterwards by the gang from Glenoran. Each gang was supported by its own heavy duty pumper unit.

The strategy adopted was to prepare firelines in the south east corner of Easter Block, along Easter and Dickson Roads in readiness to burn out the remainder of the block later in the day with the predicted southerly winds. As the western side of the block had been well burned in early December and should contain the fire, this seemed a logical approach.

D/F Pears was concerned that with the north easterly wind the fire could reach Dickson Road before the expected sea-breeze came in, so he positioned the Glenoran gang (who were fresh) along Dickson Road about a kilometre to the west of the base, to rake around trees in readiness for back burning. The Willow Springs men were positioned east of the water hole at the junction of Dickson and Easter Roads. They were instructed to make the fireline parallel to and about 4 or 5 chains (about 100 metres) north of and west of Easter Road.

However, the wind had been veering from north east to north and northwest and by about 1:45 D/F Pears realised that it was definitely from the northwest so he gave instructions to commence back burning. Jim Valentine commenced firing with a drip torch with Overseer Riising patrolling closely behind him. The back burn was running freely down the gentle slope towards the main fire which was approaching rapidly and appeared to be about a kilometre away.

Pears could see that with a strong north westerly wind chopping to the west and with the fire burning fiercely, that it would strike hard at the perimeter being held by the Willow Springs gang. He immediately went to bring up the Glenoran gang and heavy duty pumper units as reinforcements. By this time, however, the main fire was dropping burning embers on both sides of Dickson Road, starting spot-fires.

About this time there was a serious change in weather conditions. The low pressure trough that had been sitting off the west coast suddenly moved in and behind it came a front with half-gale force north-westerly winds. The forest exploded into a raging inferno. The time was later fixed with precision at between 2:20 and 2:40pm.

The Forests Department's official report of the fire sums up what happened next: *"From this point on descriptions are somewhat confused as events moved with amazing speed."*

Six men from the Willow Springs gang appear to have been spread out over the fire line with Overseer Riising at the western and McCorkhill at the eastern extremity, perhaps 300 or 400 yards away. Valentine started lighting with Overseer Riising following closely, however lighting was proceeding so readily that Riising decided a second lighter was unnecessary and therefore patrolled the sector as it was lit by Valentine. Lighting had been proceeding for a bare five minutes or so when Valentine noticed that fires were spotting up behind him on unburnt country so he called to some of his mates to deal with the "hop-overs". Two of them dealt with the first one or two hopovers, but it quickly became apparent that the hopovers were lighting-up in so many places that any further back burning was futile. Barrett therefore ran back to tell Overseer Riising (as the whole area was now covered in heavy smoke) only to find that he was cut off by flames across the track and he could not get through to Riising. He returned to the men and they immediately decided to get out by crossing the 4 chain strip to Easter Road. There was a loss of time here as Butler went back to get McCorkhill and another man who was believed to be still on the fireline. However, McCorkhill and the other man had themselves returned to the road and after some shouting and confusion, all six men evidently got together on the road.

However, the planned escape route along Easter Road running north was found to have been crossed by another tongue of fire and the men were thus cut off with fire both to the left and right of them.

Valentine and McCorkhill disagreed on which direction they should strike into the scrub to get to Dickson Road, Valentine indicating it should be almost due east, and McCorkhill wishing to go south east. Whether or not he realised that this was the shortest distance to Dickson Road and an escape is not known but certainly McCorkhill, although aged, was the most experienced bushman in the group. The rest of the men were apparently 100 yards or so further west. Meanwhile, Valentine, from whom this description was obtained, struck out through the heavy scrub followed closely by Barrett. Although patches were lighting up around them they apparently made their way downhill through ti-tree and netic scrub some 2 to 4 metres high, to a point below the junction of two small gullies which joined and flowed northwards towards Easter Brook.

Heavy green scrub under a canopy of karri gave them a brief respite before they burst through to the far side and made their way to the ridge top where the going was somewhat easier and the scrub of lesser height. They followed a course curving southwest along the ridge and came out on Dickson Road about a mile and a quarter east of Easter road. Looking back before striking out from the track, the last they saw was McCorkhill entering scrub from the track with the other three men running towards him.

Apparently the party of four struck out in a course midway between that taken by Valentine and that which McCorkhill originally desired to go. They progressed about 18 chains (nearly 400 metres) and crossed the head of the first creek before being overcome and collapsing in a small group at the butt of a large marri tree.

The remainder of the gang, including Overseer Riising and A/F Talbot withdrew up Dickson Road to the west. Two of them, Talbot and Riising, had to make their way through a short section of a few yards where the fire was burning on both sides of the road, but beyond that the road was clear to the west. They thought at the time that the rest of the men would be able to withdraw northwards along Easter Road, not being aware that another tongue of fire had cut off this escape route.

All the gangs were pulled out at 3:00pm and a new base was set up at the junction of Dickson Road and New Chum Road to the west, while the fire raged out of control into the adjacent Iffley Block. Overseer Riising and McCrone travelled along Hopkins, Sands and Easter Roads searching for the missing men, and A/F Talbot proceeded down Iffley and Coronation Roads until he was blocked by fire. No sign of the men was found.

During this period the D4 bulldozer from Manjimup which Talbot had requested at 8:00pm the previous evening arrived and was sent to Telephone Road in readiness for an assault on the fire later in the day. Had the machine not been delayed by having to wait for a low-loader to transport it, there is a strong probability that the fire would have been contained that night.

After a reconnaissance of the fire, at 3:30pm Forester Pears notified Nannup office that the fire was completely out of control and he proposed to back burn from Jubilee and Easter Roads, and to do this he would require two gangs from Nannup for night burning. He arranged for the men to meet him at Dickson Tower at 6:30pm.

Shortly afterwards it was reported that the Yanmah gang was ready to relieve the Glenoran team, and a TD 9 bulldozer was ready and waiting for the low loader to convey it to the site. The bulk of the resources of the region were being organised for the night operation. Meanwhile Talbot and Riising were continuing to patrol the roads in search of the missing men, without success.

The official report states that at 5:50pm two of the missing men i.e. Valentine and Barrett, joined the main group. Forester Wes Forrest, the duty officer in the Manjimup office, and who was in contact all offices and lookout towers, was actually speaking to Towerman Doug Ray, when Ray announced: "I can see two of the missing men coming in now".

Valentine gave details of what had occurred, and expressed the firm views that the other four men could not have survived. The William Springs men wanted the loss of the four men reported, and a full search organised. However Forester Pears, who had inspected the east side of the fire and was aware of its ferocity, refused to give permission for fear of losing more men.

At 6:30pm the Willows Springs men left for the spot where the missing men had been last seen by Valentine and Barrett. About 8:00pm they returned to report that they had found the rakes which the men had abandoned with the wooden handles consumed by the fire. By then it was too dark and hazardous to search further and they returned to base. They later became involved in the general back-burning operations, lighting along Coronation and Davidson Roads throughout the night. With five gangs of men, heavy duty pumping units, and two bulldozers all engaged in suppression activities the fire, burning less fiercely in the night air was gradually subdued and contained. Soon after daylight the situation was in hand. At 8:25 am (on Friday 3rd January) District Forester Pears was able to report that the fire was tied in and under control, and that it would depend on the efficiency of the patrol if it was to remain that way. "Mopping up" was to continue for some days.

The William Springs men were relieved next morning by Assistant Forester Bill Tame and the Jarrahwood crew who took over their heavy duty.

They refused to go home until their missing mates were located and resumed the search for them. By this time they had been in the field for one and a half days and 2 nights.

A/F Talbot notified Nannup at 7:45am that the men were still missing and considered the matter serious. He requested that the police bring out a search party and a Minister of Religion be notified. This was done and Constable Johnston of Nannup was notified.

Forest Guard Frank Vince with three men from Palmer's Log Hauling Contractors team arrived around 8:00 am and were guided to the spot where the burnt rakes had been found and began searching. They located the four badly burned bodies within half an hour. They also saw the footprints in the fresh ash-bed of the searchers of the previous evening, who had passed close by where the bodies lay.

At 9:30 am D/F Pears informed Nannup office by phone that the remains of the four men had been located and asked if the Willows Springs settlement could be notified before the remainder of the gang returned home. ADFO Morrison promptly notified Constable Johnston who was organising a search party among the men of Kauri Timber Company mill at Nannup. The constable proceeded directly to the scene of the tragedy to make arrangements for the bodies and to set in train other formalities.

Forester Wesley Forrest was given the unenviable task of conveying the tragic news to the families of the victims and the settlement. Everyone had been waiting anxiously and had no illusions regarding the severity and magnitude of the fire as the dense, dark smoke from it was visible for miles. Ted Cracknell, who later became a long-serving field officer of the Forests Department, was working in a forestry gang a few miles south of Pemberton, over 40 kilometres away, at the time. With his workmates he saw the great pall of smoke rise. They likened it to the cloud from an atomic bomb.

Wes Forrest fulfilled his task manfully. He was well respected in the region, sensitive and experienced, and broke the devastating news to the three widows and their families consolingly, with sympathy and understanding. Now retired after a long and successful career, he revealed in 1997: "That day was by far the worst I spent in all my years with the Department".

A Departmental inquiry was initiated and conducted by the Regional Superintendent Don Stewart. In his report to the Conservator of Forests Stewart stated that:

"Following a telephone message from Nannup about 9:30am on Friday 3rd instant, advising that the bodies of four employees missing at a fire had been found, I proceeded to Nannup with Fire Control Superintendent Milesi to ascertain the facts of the tragedy."

The report concludes with the paragraph:

"During the next three days of inquiry, close contact was maintained with the local police and visiting Detective-Sergeant Sullivan. The scene of the tragedy was visited in company with Messrs Valentine and Barnett and a fairly clear picture of the event during the critical fire break-through was obtained. Copies of the statements given by the men are being made available by the police and will be attached to this when received".

An accurate record of movements of personnel and progress of the fire was obtained from log-book entries kept at fire towers and in district offices.

A workman's representative, Jack Walsh, also visited Nannup and Willow Springs and interviewed those who had been directly involved, taking evidence which could be presented to an inquiry. However, on his return journey to Perth he was involved in a collision with a log-truck laden with poles near Harvey and killed. It is understood that the briefcase containing the material he had collected was recovered by police and incorporated in their files. Wes Forrest recalls that a Coroner's Inquest was held but neither he nor Jim Valentine were called to appear before it.

From Superintendent Stewart's report it was apparent that the critical factor in the cause of the tragedy was that the weather information upon which the officers based their strategy, was inaccurate. They were unaware that a front was due to pass through the area, bringing with it a dramatic change in wind direction and weather conditions which caused the bush to virtually explode, making control of the fire impossible. This frontal movement brought the six men directly into the path of the raging head-fire. A tongue of fire rolled past them on their left, and another on their right, cutting off their escape along either Dickson or Easter Roads.

In his report Stewart made several critical comments in his margin notes, but apportioned no blame to any individual. Extreme weather conditions, and the wind changing without warning, was the essential cause.

The tragedy was received with shock throughout the state. Several days afterwards, the then Premier, Hon A.R.G. Hawke visited the district, and in the company of D/F Wes Forrest, travelled to Willow Springs to meet the grieving families and to offer consolation.

The "Warren Times", the local Manjimup newspaper initiated a practical expression of sympathy by setting up a Widows Relief Fund for the 3 widows and total of 12 children of the victims. This move was well received and attracted support from Collie and other centres as well as the local districts and resulted in a most helpful contribution to each of the families.

A great deal of sympathy was felt for George ("Snow") McCorkhill, a well liked bachelor of 64 years of age who was looking forward to his retirement within a few months. He had only recently returned to work after a fall from a truck which had resulted in several cracked ribs, and when he joined the gang on the day of the fire the overseer included him with some reluctance.

In Nannup, a stone monument was raised in remembrance of the four men who died. It bears the simple inscription which reads:

"In memory of
John Hendrick Hilliger,
Robert Henry Johnston,
George McCorkhill,
John Francis Wiltshire-Butler,

Who perished in a bushfire in the course of duty with the Forests Department,
on 2nd January 1958.

Three of these men were accorded a further memorial when forest blocks were named after them. These were Hilliger, McCorkhill and Butler, but as a Johnston block already existed, he was omitted to obviate a possibility of future confusion. Hilliger's son Bill was later taken on as a forest cadet, graduated as a field staff officer and enjoyed a successful career in forestry and aviation in the Northern Territory.

The Escape and Aftermath

One aspect of the official report of the Easter Block Fire which was deficient was any detail of the amazing escape of Jim Valentine and Kevin Barrett. This was an extraordinary feat of endurance, courage and bushmanship. The report is a thorough and objective account of events and movements as they transpired with amplifying comment when required. It's the main purposes were to ascertain how the fire occurred, its behavioural pattern, the acts which were taken regarding suppression and the circumstances leading to the deaths of the four men. But little reference is made of the ordeal which Valentine and Barrett endured. Given the intent of the report this is understandable, but the actual details of the escape as provided by Jim Valentine, John Tillman (ex Bush Boss from Donnelly River), and D/F Wesley Forrest merit recording and acknowledging.

When the group of six, after struggling out from the fire-line they had been raking to Easter Road, realised the desperate situation with which they were confronted, there was little time for concerted planning. Both escape routes were cut off by flames, and the fire was raging so fiercely that the forest canopy, even in the area of the previous advance-burn was alight. It was they who decided a case of every man looking to his own well-being.

Jim Valentine disagreed with Snow McCorkhill regarding the direction of flight which offered the best chance of getting through the encircling flames and stood to his conviction as though by some instinct. Saying "I think I know a way out along the gully", he set off at a run, to the east, closely followed by Kevin Barrett. The others were doubtful about the course Jim had taken and opted for a more southerly direction towards Dickson Road, hoping to find a gap in the closing tongues of fire.

Running strongly, Valentine and Barrett were able to pass through a gap in the flames which were closing rapidly. Glancing back they had a last glimpse of their workmates taking off. They continued down the slope and reached the bed of a creek which ran into Easter Brook, just below the junction of two gullies.

The watercourse on either side was covered with an overburden of dense drooping scrub which formed a low, rough tunnel along the actual creek bed. Through this tunnel they scrambled, half bent over, clambering over and under logs and limbs, hindered by thick prickly undergrowth and the unevenness of the creek bed. Above them lighted material from the fire dropped, starting spot fires which spread readily. In places, the burning scrub fell into the tunnel, burning holes in their clothes. (Jim still retains the fire holed singlet he wore on that day). At times they were forced to scramble from the creek bed which had lighted ahead of them, crash through the scrub on the bank, then return to watercourse. All the while the heat, the choking smoke and lack of oxygen made breathing almost impossible.

By this time the fire was reaching it's roaring crescendo as the front passed through. It's intensity was increased by the draft it created and flames being drawn in from all sides. The centre of the inferno appeared to be the area to which the other four men appeared to be heading.

At such a close range the roar of the headfire was awesome and the oppressive atmosphere stifling.

Under the pressure and pace of their flight Barrett reached the limit of his endurance. The young forest guard fell several times and gamely resumed the flight. Finally Jim had to physically assist him to his feet and to press on with the words:

"We may have to say our prayers, but we'll do it on the run".

There was no thought of leaving Barrett at any time, and he continued to urge on and help his mate.

In this condition they continued for about two kilometres before they could leave the bottom of the gully and travel to the relatively more easily traversable country of the ridge until they reached Dickson Tower Road and safety. Both men were exhausted as they paused to rest briefly before moving further east.

Kevin Barrett was in a serious condition, close to unconsciousness, staggering uncomprehendingly. Jim, concerned for his companions safety laid him on a cairn of rocks adjacent to the roadside and tied him to a sturdy post in the centre of the rock-pile using some of his clothes to prevent him wandering off into any danger.

After a short time Jim assessed their position, and led the way further east to the junction of Dickson and Coronation Roads. Here they waited as the fire roared into Iffley Block. When they decided that the main fire had passed through they set about retracing their steps to the west along Dickson Road to locate the trucks at the base.

Travelling as rapidly as they were able, they passed through the blackened aftermath of the fire, still heavily smoking and smouldering, and passed the burnt out base at Easter Road from which the vehicles had been withdrawn. Finally, after covering about 8 kilometres they arrived at the re-established base at the junction of New Chum Road in the proximity of Dickson Tower. They had made good their escape, walked and run a distance which would have totalled some 15 kilometres, in blistering heat, choking on the smoke of the fire, and without a drink.

John Tillman in his book, "Donnelly - Men and Mill", records that the men were shocked and disbelieving when they initially heard the news that the men had been caught in the inferno and had almost certainly perished. However, the attitude and evident conviction of Jim Valentine made them quickly realise that enormity of the situation and they were galvanised into action. According to Jim, Kevin Barrett was taken to Nannup Hospital for observation in the wake of his ordeal.

He was with the remainder of the Willow Springs men when they set out at 6:30pm in a bid to locate their missing mates. Finding their bush-rakes with the handles charred must have been an ominous indicator and the gang would have held little hope of their survival when

they returned to base at 8:00pm. The gang went on to rest and prepare for the scheduled night suppression operations of block-lighting, mop up and patrolling, and at 2:00 am (Friday) were detailed to light north along Coronation Road.

By the time the Willows Springs men took up their positions, Jim Valentine was feeling the stress he had been under. He recounts that in the small hours of Friday morning he suddenly realised that he was patrolling along Coronation Road, but had no idea how he came to be there. With the rest of the gang he remained on duty until they were relieved at 7:00am on Friday morning, when they joined the resumed search for the missing men. Even after the bodies were located at 8:30am, by which time the fire had been brought under control, they remained to assist the police and department officers in piecing together the events of the previous day. It was after midday by the time they departed for Willows Springs.

On reaching the settlement they found the residents in a state of shock and grieving. Wesley Forrest had broken the news, and was trying to console the families. There was little else Jim Valentine could do, and he was heading out the back way to his utility to return home when Forrest noted the stress showing on him and quietly said:

“Don’t show up for a few days - not until you’ve had a chance to recover”.

John Tillman comments wryly:

“Today men who go through such an ordeal are debriefed by men who are experts in this field. Their job is to convince the survivors they have done no wrong and to clear their conscience of any misgivings they may have had. Jim Vallentine and the other men were simply told to go back to work. They had to carry any personal problems themselves”.

The actions of Jim Valentine were recognised by his workmates but not generally by the Forests Department or the press. Wesley Forrest considered that he had saved the life of Kevin Barrett and recommended that he receive a bravery award, but with the hurley-burley and inquiries which came with the aftermath of the fire, nothing was done. It was just over 39 years before public recognition was awarded to him. This took the form of a presentation by the Nannup Shire Council of a Certificate of Appreciation and an inscribed wall clock for his effort. The ceremony was held during the Nannup Festival held on 26 January, 1997.

Jim Valentine

Jim Valentine was born at Maylands on 17th June, 1923. While still a young boy he moved with his family to South Australia where he grew up. Following the death of his father he returned to Western Australia in 1938, and following the outbreak of World War II in 1939, he joined the Australian Imperial Forces in which he spent six years. With the 2nd 28th Battalion he served in a number of war zones which included the Middle East, New Guinea and Borneo.

After receiving his discharge from the Army he moved to the Manjimup District and took up a farm, Nelson Location 9066, at Yanmah with the assistance of a War Service loan.

In 1950 he married Ella Christina Ralston, daughter of a well known family which had settled on a property to the west of Manjimup prior to World War I (1914-18). They went on to raise a family of two boys and two girls - Eileen, whose married name is Harmer; Vivian, who married Irene King; Brian, whose wife was, prior to her marriage, Noelene Ross; and colleen, married to Dave Finch.

Developing a farm in the timber country of the south west is a prolonged and costly business because of clearing, and Jim found that he had to work off the farm to ensure an income. He worked the property in the evenings and during the weekends. It was an arduous existence but he was an active and industrious individual, and recognised as such when he joined the Forests Department.

His performance throughout the Easter Block fire revealed qualities which belied his normal unassuming manner. From the moment the six men trapped by the fire realised their desperate position, he responded in a positive and determined manner. He unhesitatingly assessed, and decided what he thought offered the best avenue of escaping the flames and followed it unswervingly through the most life-threatening of conditions. The effort he made was a wonder of endurance, and his tenacity resulted in saving not only his own life, but that of Kevin Barrett as well.

The factors which probably contributed to his achievements included his army background, which developed the self discipline and control which he showed during the extended crisis period. Also, being neither a smoker nor drinker, and highly active in his daily work he was in prime physical condition which resulted in his great stamina. There was, too, his inherent strong will to survive.

Jim retired from the Department of Conservation and Land Management in 1985, after which he and his wife moved to the Perth suburb of Bayswater. The farm, though is still retained in the family.

He is reticent about talking of the Easter Block fire, but he still retains the fire-holed singlet he was wearing on January 2nd 1958. When asked by journalists at the Nannup Shire Presentation in January 1997 for comment on his experience of the fire he replied:

“I’ve never commented on that to the press. You’ll find all about it in the Battye Library”

*Unveiling of Memorial
at Nanmup - by*

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS

26.4.59

We are assembled here today to do honour to the memory of 4 members of the Forests Department in this district who in the line of duty lost their lives in a bush fire on the 2nd January, 1958. In the course of controlling a bush fire some 20 miles to the Southeast of Nanmup a sudden violent and unexpected change of weather conditions occurred which, without warning, caused the fire to change its direction and race down upon those who were attempting to control it. Faced with this unexpected danger some men were able to escape, but 4 of their companions trapped in dense scrub were overwhelmed and perished. These 4 men were:-

John Francis Wiltshire-Butler

Jack Hilliger

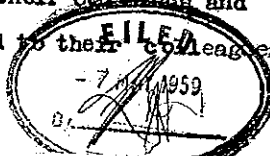
Robert Johnston

George Henry McCorkill

When the news of this disaster became known throughout the Forests Department, there was a wave of horror and sympathy spread through all ranks from top to bottom, both for those who had perished and for the families left behind.

Throughout the long history of fire control in the Western Australian Forests Department no such tragedy had ever occurred before. Through many long years of forest fire control most officers and men had experienced at one time or another moments when they stood in dire peril of injury to life and limb from the fire demon, and quite a few had known what it was to be brushed by the wings of the Angel of Death, but to escape.

Throughout the length and breadth of the Department the men of ^{forest} this service, including those now holding even the very highest positions, who had experienced over many years fatigue, hunger, thirst and many other discomforts in long hours at the fire front felt in their own minds and hearts the horror of what had happened to their colleagues -



men like ourselves although unknown to many of us by name or in person, but bound together with that common spirit of service and devotion which actuates forestry men everywhere.

Immediately a committee was formed to raise a fund to make adequate provision for their dependents. To this fund a generous response was made, not only by men of the Forests Department and the Timber Industry, but by all sections of the public, and finally the fund reached a total of £8,600. This fund is administered by trustees composed of representatives of the Forests Department, A.W.U., Legacy, Apex, and the Netherlands Consulate, who have been untiring in their efforts to straighten out the affairs of the various families, and to whom the public owe their gratitude, because it has been no light task for them.

Fortunately in the modern welfare state, the more serious economic consequences of the loss of a breadwinner have been largely reduced, but there still remains the personal loss of husband and father, which cannot be mitigated or compensated for.

All industries have their own particular hazards which, however much we try do not appear to be amenable to complete elimination. In the factory, in the sawmill, on the farm, in the bush - in fact right back to the days when man lived by hunting, the gaining of a living has never been divorced entirely from some danger.

The control of fire is the basic job of the men in the forest service. Without fire control, forestry cannot be successfully practised. Without the need for fire control, the Forests Department would provide employment for far fewer men.

Here around Nannup we are not only protecting and developing natural forest wealth, but establishing extensive new plantation forests which even in the day of the present generation will bring large employment and much wealth and

3.

expansion into this district. But it will all be in vain if we do not control the fire menace. This must not be regarded merely as the job of the Forests Department, but as a community responsibility for community good - for the future employment of your young people, and the development of better living and amenities in your district, which will come as your town and district expands with forestry expansion. In time to come Nannup District will be one of the largest timber producing areas in the State. *It must protect its forest wealth to achieve this, however.*

In erecting this small monument in memory of those who perished by fire last year, the Forests Department hopes that it will serve as a continual reminder ^{to all} of the serious consequences of fire to both life and property, and a reminder of the need for care to prevent fires starting, for resolution and willingness to suppress those that start as quickly as possible, and of the responsibility of all towards others who may ^{suffer} ~~be caused~~ serious loss by carelessness or irresponsibility in the use of fire.

We have been relatively free from bush fire tragedies in Western Australia generally, but we read almost every year of lives lost in bush fires in other States, and the danger is ever present and not to be lost sight of. *Eternal vigilance will be the price of safety.*

To the families of these men whom we here commemorate today we extend our sympathy. Someone has written, "Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war", and heroism, quiet and unspectacular, occurs in human affairs every day.

It is a sign of the changes taking place in the Australian nation that one of these men, ^{John} Jan Hilliger, was a New-Australian from Holland playing his part in pioneering the country alongside John Francis Wiltshire-Butler, who hailed from England, and Australian-born Robert Johnston and George McCorkill. We salute them all, and honour their memory, as true soldiers of peacetime.

I thank you all for your attendance here at this ceremony - a pleasing mark of respect for these men, and a demonstration of sympathy to those of their relatives who are with us today.

24/4/59.
ACH:EGV.



000044F0111



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT

C-X

FILE NUMBER 000044F0111

TITLE PROTECTION 10000

TITLE

FIRE PROTECTION<
REPORTS<
BUSHFIRE AT EASTER BLOCK NANNUP DIVISION<
<
VOLUME 1<

TEXT PROTECTION 10000

CREATION DATE 1:01:1957

CLASSIFICATION 0111

DESTRUCTION CODE KEEP

LOCATION ~~DRTS BOX 924~~

OLD FILE NUMBER FD19571579

STATE RECORDS OFFICE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ARCHIVES LOAN SLIP

1255

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------|
| Date Requested 22/1/4 | Request Received by FAX | Agency Conservation | Date Due 22/2/4 |
| Acc or Cons No. 5927 | File/Item No. 44F0111 | Year VI | Location |
| Box No. | | | |
| Title..... | | | |
| Retrieved by PA | Date | Conditions of Loan Records to be returned within 28 days unless extension of loan is granted by the State Records Office of Western Australia | |
| Already on Loan/Reserve for | | Agency Contact | |
| Remarks m/w | | | |

121

CONFIDENTIAL.

UNDER SECRETARY:

Further to the Cabinet minute hereunder, the subject of the protective measures taken by the Forests Department in regard to the fire at Willow Springs was discussed with Mr. Golding of the A.W.U. some weeks ago. (17/7/58).

During conversation, Mr. Golding indicated that he had no particular viewpoint on the necessity for including additional protective measures in any State Emergency plans to be prepared. Mr. Golding felt that the existing Bush Fires Protection and the Forests Department Fire Fighting Organisation were satisfactory, but, in the case of the Nannup fires, were too slow in operation.

It was said that he, Mr. Golding, had asked for a further conference with the Forests Department without success but that his request for such a conference had been renewed recently and a reply was awaited.

I asked whether there were any particular matters he would care to discuss with me or whether he would care to think over any matters to be considered in association with current planning activities as related to State Emergency Service. Mr. Golding indicated that he had nothing in particular in mind at that time but that he would again consider the various aspects.

I invited him to call at this office at any time for discussions should he consider it necessary. To date however, no further action has ensued.

During the whole of the conversation it was apparent that Mr. Golding considered the existing regulations were satisfactory but that his criticisms were directed to their administration.

Subsequently, I discussed with the Conservator of Forests Mr. Golding's request (para. 3 above). Mr. Harris stated that this is not in accordance with fact and that he is unaware of any request of this nature having been rejected by his Department.

My personal impression is that it is unlikely that the A.W.U. will seek to press this matter further.

W. L. Linn
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
OF CIVIL DEFENCE.

30th September, 1958.

A.B.H.
9.10.58

170
CABINET agrees that the Deputy Director of Civil Defence (Mr. Lonnie) should, in the course of his Civil Defence and civil emergency planning, examine the protection measures taken by the Forestry Department, particularly in the cases of the fires at Willow Springs and Mayanup, the examination to include bush fire organisation in the agricultural areas.

AM.
PREMIER.

10/6/1958.

HON. MR. GRAHAM.

Forwarded for your information. The file has been passed to Mr. Lonnie.

12th June, 1958.

UNDER SECRETARY,
PREMIER'S DEPT.

119

THE HON. THE PREMIER (IN CABINET):

The A.W.U. seeks an enquiry by an independent investigator into the Willow Springs bush fire tragedy.

I have already made submissions to you indicating that from my study of the papers no further action is necessary.

It might be added that earlier this year Mr. Stotter, Magistrate of Bunbury, addressed a minute to the Under Secretary for Law in the following terms:-

"In view of the extensive enquiry by Departmental officers and the Police, no good purpose would be served by holding an inquest."

All of the statements made by witnesses and people associated with the fire were read by Mr. Stotter.

I recommend that no further action be taken in this matter.

3/6/58


MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

THE HON. THE MINISTER FOR FORESTS:Bush Fire Tragedy:

Comments on the seven points raised in the letter dated 1st May, 1958, are offered as under serially - ^{A.H.U.} 1

1. Failure in issuing a warning order for standby gang after the investigating unit had been dispatched.

When this smoke was first reported it was within an area which had been surrounded by an old controlled burn. As the burning was finished about the 4th December and there had been two smokes only sighted since that date, (one on 11th and one on 12th December - both of which proved on investigation to be false alarms) it was quite a reasonable assumption on the part of the Officer-in-Charge that investigation only was warranted, and that probably no further action would be required. On the two previous occasions when smokes were sighted both had been caused apparently from some tree or log which had been alight within the burned area and when investigated was found to be surrounded by burnt ground and requiring no attention. But for the fact that the Department had allowed the Barlee overseer, on compassionate grounds, to go to Perth with an employee whose daughter was seriously ill in Princess Margaret Hospital, it is probable that the Barlee gang (instead of a two-man investigating unit) would have made an early attack while the fire was small and contained it that afternoon. It was this overseer who had carried out the controlled burning and knew the area more intimately. This "charge" is drawn from Mr. Stewart's summary (p.67, item 3) where he mentions approximately 1 hour's delay resulting. But actually this had no ultimate bearing on the tragedy, as the fire virtually went out that night, and had to be left in the darkness.

2. Failure to provide or make adequate arrangements for rations.

Normal arrangements were made as far as rations were concerned. It is the standard practice when men are picked up from their homes outside normal working hours to require them to take food for at least one meal while many officers make a practice of instructing that a "double crib" be taken. Ample time was given the men to get some food together before the gang departed. That night the Assistant Forester was amazed to find that one or two men had failed to bring sufficient food; others had more than enough, and it was shared around. Assistant Forester Talbot supplied some from his own crib and stated that he had plenty more, and no man went short. Emergency rations are normally supplied if the men are sent straight from their work to a fire without a chance of picking up food supplies from home or if they are kept at a fire for additional meal times.

3. Failure to organise a full scale dawn attack after the Assistant Forester, J. Talbot, had reported to District Officer Morison, at 7 p.m. on the 1st January from Dickson Tower when he informed Morison that he would require additional men and equipment to surround the fire.

This "charge" is also drawn from Mr. Stewart's summary (p. 67, item 4), where he also explains the probable reasons which prompted decisions made. On receipt of word from Assistant Forester Talbot on the evening of the 1st January that additional men would be required to surround the fire, the Officer-in-Charge, Nannup, arranged for another gang to be on the spot for a dawn

attack. They actually arrived shortly after midnight and bedded down till dawn. As the weather forecast given on the afternoon of the 1st for the ensuing day did not indicate any appreciable change in conditions from that experienced on the 1st, and as the fire was still small in area, the two gangs were deemed adequate to surround the fire before it again became active. It should also be remembered that the 1st January was a Public Holiday and only a skeleton staff was on duty. Also as mentioned under para.(1) Overseer Gale who resided at Barlee only four miles from the outbreak had, with reluctance, been permitted to take a Barlee employee to Perth on compassionate grounds. Such absence would not normally have been permitted.

4. Failure to start a burn back when requested by Assistant Forester Talbot, to do so on the night of the 1st January.

In discussion with the Regional Superintendent, Assistant Forester Talbot denied that he made a request to start a back burn on the night of the 1st January. He may have suggested it as an alternative to direct attack but apparently it was not seriously considered. In any case as his evidence shows, by midnight the fire would not run and was dying out in many patches so that a back burn may well have led to conditions even more difficult the following day in that a freshly lit face of fire would have failed to run in any distance, particularly in the dense green scrub towards the main Brook.

5. The failure of the Department to relieve the Willow Springs Gang who had been at the fire front from approximately 5 p.m. on the 1st January to the time of the tragedy at approximately 2.30 p.m. on the 2nd.

It has not been unusual in the past for both officers and gangs to be on the job for periods well in excess of 24 hours before relief, although generally relief after a shorter period is aimed at. Men are paid "fire service" penalty rates for the whole period spent at a fire, including mealtimes, rest and sleeping periods. All senior officers, including myself, have at times spent days at fires bedding down at the fireline the same as the men. Although not relieved, the Willow Spring gang had bedded down for some four hours on the previous night and had again had a spell from about 9 a.m. when they withdrew from the fire face to rest till about 12 noon when they were put on raking prior to back burning. At that stage, the fresh gang from Glenoran was placed on the section of fireline where it was expected that the main fire might first approach the fireline, and the Willow Spring gang was placed on a section where an early break-through was thought less likely. It was the unexpected change in wind strength and velocity completely contrary to Weather Bureau forecast which caused the break-through where the Willow Spring gang was located.

6. Failure of the Department to withdraw the men when the fire got completely out of control.

It is evident from the officially declared statements of all men concerned at the fire face that when the fire got suddenly and completely out of control, withdrawal was the only action possible. Unfortunately, the first break-through suddenly split off the Overseer, Assistant Forester and two men from the other six men who were further east, thus preventing contact between the two groups. It is also evident from the statements of the survivors that the men themselves realised withdrawal was essential and attempted to do so, but neither they nor the officers in charge were to know that the escape

route on the track leading to the north had been cut off by another tongue of fire. It is fairly certain that had either the overseer or officer not been cut off from this group, he could have directed them out along Easter Road, but without such leadership there was some confusion and delay in the men getting away. Under the circumstances prevailing and in fact at any major fire, men are so disposed around the perimeter of a fire as to best limit its spread. It is obviously impossible for any officer to be in close contact with all men at all times. Even within one gang, an overseer may have his men spread out over a considerable distance and be in immediate contact with only one or two of them at any given time. Therefore of necessity, some reliance must be placed on the individual man to act in a commonsense way in an unforeseen emergency. Among those present at the Nannup fire there is remarkable unanimity regarding the exceptional speed at which adverse and dangerous conditions developed.

7. Failure of Department to take precautions to prevent fire spreading from advance burning which had been done back in November of 1957, adjacent to where the disastrous fire occurred.

All normal precautions were taken in mopping up after the controlled burning as is shown by the evidence of Overseer J. F. Gale who completed this mopping up on the 5th December. Subsequent to that date as mentioned earlier, smokes were sighted on two occasions but rapidly subsided. They may have been caused by the fall of old rotten trees which had still been burning, but surrounded by burnt ground. The fact that no further smoke showed until January 1st is evidence of a pretty satisfactory clean-up. In a normal year the gang would have completed the burning out of this area which had been surrounded by a perimeter burn but because of the extremely dry and hot conditions, a complete ban on burning was proclaimed by the Bush Fires Board and no further lighting was done by this Department after the clean-up on the 5th December. It is absurd to suggest that any further precautions should have been taken by this Department when there was no fire in evidence between the 5th December and the 1st January. To attempt to keep patrolling all old controlled burns for weeks after they are made as safe as possible would be impracticable and ruinously costly. Lookout towers and telephone and radio communication are provided to pick up the occasional outbreak.

I am fairly well satisfied that the actual source of the outbreak was an old rotten Karri tree which we found on the edge of wet swampy land near the head of a gully. It had apparently been burning in an old punky section about 30' to 40' above ground and this had gradually smouldered away for three or four weeks until the tree broke off at this point. The top half of the tree continued to burn on the ground and fire evidently spread from this point in scrub which was too green and damp to burn in the first week in December. This point was a half mile from the nearest road.

A.B. Harris

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

19/5/58
ACH:EGV.

Am. Minister for Forests.

HON. MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

The attached letter from the Branch Secretary of the Australian Workers' Union (W.A. Branch) seeks an enquiry into the Willow Springs Bushfire Tragedy by an independent investigator.

Would you please circularise Cabinet Ministers regarding this matter, in order that it may be discussed at a reasonably early meeting of Cabinet.


6th May, 1958.


PREMIER.

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS:

Will you please supply me as early as possible with your comments on the points raised by Mr. Golding in his letter to the Hon. Premier hereunder.

9/5/58


MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' UNION**Westralian Branch**SECRETARY'S RESIDENCE
PHONE MW 496

CHG/NW

17-19 JAMES STREET, PERTH

PHONES: B 2725 : BA 5765

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS
UNION. PERTH

1st May, 1958.

Mr. A.R.G. Hawke,
Hon. Premier,
Premiers Department,
Treasury Buildings,
PERTH..W.A.

Dear Sir,

Enquiry, Willow Springs Bushfire Tragedy.

Further to my letter under date 6.2.58 relative to the above, when a request was put forward for an enquiry into the tragic deaths of four Forestry workers which occurred on January 2nd last, I again respectfully request that after fully examining the Departmental File on the fire that the Government give earnest consideration to the holding of a non-departmental enquiry at the earliest possible date.

The Departmental file which consists of reports of Forestry Officials and statements, not affidavits, made by workers who were members of the gang engaged fighting the fire, warrants an independent enquiry into the disaster.

The following submissions, the Union contends, warrants a full and independent enquiry:-

1. Failure in issuing a warning order for a standby gang after the investigating unit had been dispatched.
2. Failure to provide or make adequate arrangements for rations.
3. Failure to organise a full scale dawn attack after the Assistant Forester, J. Talbot had reported to District Officer, Morrison, at 7 p.m. on the 1st. January from Dickson Tower when he informed Morrison that he would require additional men and equipment to surround the fire.
4. Failure to start a burn back when requested by Assistant Forester, Talbot, to do so on the night of the 1st. January.
5. The failure of the Department to relieve the Willow Springs Gang who had been at the fire front from approximately 5 p.m. on the 1st. January to the time of the tragedy at approximately 2.30 p.m. on the 2nd.

BRANCH SECRETARY: C. H. GOLDING

MINING DIVISION SECRETARY: F. W. COLLARD

AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' UNION

Westralian Branch

SECRETARY'S RESIDENCE
PHONE MW496

17-19 JAMES STREET, PERTH
PHONES: B 2725 : BA 5765

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS
UNION. PERTH

2.

6. Failure of the Department to withdraw the men when the fire got completely out of control.
7. Failure of Department to take precautions to prevent fire spreading from advance burning which had been done back in November of 1957, adjacent to where the disastrous fire occurred.

Yours faithfully,

.....
C. H. Golding
BRANCH SECRETARY A.W.U.
W.A. BRANCH

FORESTS 1579/57

HON. MR. GRAHAM.

I understand the A.W.U. is to make a request to the Government for consideration by members of Cabinet for a special independent inquiry to be made regarding the tragic bushfire at Nannup earlier this year.

Until that request has been received and decided, it would be advisable to delay a reply to the Preston Road Board.

30th April, 1958.

Asst.
PREMIER.

AB
2-5-58

C. J. F.
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS

5/5/58

Noted.

AB. N.
2



PREMIER'S OFFICE
PERTH

The Secretary,
Preston Road Board,
DONNYBROOK. W.A.

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter of the 20th January, I have to advise that a very thorough enquiry into the tragic bushfire at Nannup was carried out by Senior officers of the Forests Department, and also by the Police Department. All reports have been closely studied by the Hon. Minister for Forests, and the Secretary of the A.W.U. has had access to the reports and evidence.

The facts which have emerged from this show that a public enquiry is not warranted and that the men's deaths were due to sheer misadventure under exceptional conditions, and a sudden unexpected change of wind direction.

The protective burning policy of the Forests Department is considered to be adequate, and in the light of many years' experience, efficiently carried out, and no useful purpose would be served by a costly public enquiry. The Department's fire control organisation is generally regarded throughout Australia as an example for others to copy.

Careful attention is paid by the Forests Department when selecting New Australians to see that they can speak and understand English. An investigation of all New Australians employed by the Department was undertaken at once on receipt of your letter, and it was found that practically without exception, they spoke and understood English quite well. Mr. Jan Hillinger, the only New Australian in the gang, and who perished, spoke English very well indeed.

Yours faithfully,

PREMIER.

*Note:
a draft
only.*

THE HON. THE MINISTER FOR FORESTS:

Nannup Fire Tragedy.

A draft of a suggested reply to the Preston
Road Board is forwarded herewith for your consideration.

A.C. Harris
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

15/4/58
ACH:EGV.

See also p. 261, 262.

A.C.H.

John Premier
[Signature]
21/4/58

THE HON. PREMIER:

Now Placed Within 1579/57.

This sub-file contains the principal relevant reports on the Nannup fire, there being an index at folio 20. The complete file, 1579/57, is attached.

It is difficult for me to gain an absolutely clear picture of the fire which resulted in the deaths of four men, but I think it should be remembered, first of all, that there are more than 4,000,000 acres of State Forests which have to be controlled and during the present summer there was experienced one of the longest dry periods on record with a fire hazard high as a consequence.

Furthermore, there can be no proper appreciation of events at the time by a calm study of the situation some time later.

I have some personal experience of fire fighting in bush country and accordingly am aware of the difficulties of movement owing to the state of the terrain and how a situation can change completely almost in a matter of minutes.

Therefore, having regard to the tall timber, with the fire overhead, the heavy nature of the undergrowth, the explosive conditions owing to the dry weather, together with the sudden unexpected change of wind direction, it will be realised that problems and difficulties were arising no doubt in rapid succession.

Generally speaking it can be said that this fire was tackled in similar manner as had been done on very many occasions previously and as was being done at that very time in many localities where there were outbreaks of fire.

In other words, at any time in very many fires there is always possibility of tragedy.

It is perhaps fortunate, in addition to the skill which has been employed, that loss of life has been avoided prior to this case.

The point I am emphasising here is that it appears there was nothing unusual in connection with the incidents pertaining to the fire and had the four unfortunate victims made their escape as did some of their colleagues and as have other fire fighters on other occasions, nothing more would have been said about this fire.

It was perhaps only an error of judgment of direction or timing, perhaps as short as a few minutes, in battling against a rapidly moving fire that caused this fire to be high lighted.

You will note from the reports the fact that long hours of service by fire fighters is inevitable and I had first hand knowledge of this in other localities when in the Warren district recently.

So far as rations are concerned, the usual arrangements were conformed with and I do not think there can be any criticism.

Regarding the allegations against the Forestry Officer in charge of operations, decisions are, as they must be.

matter for determination by a man on the spot who is trained and experienced to the knowledge of conditions existing, including the time of the day and the official weather forecast.

As has been emphasised, there was a sudden unexpected change of direction of wind of considerable force which seriously affected the situation.

The resultant outcome may have been even worse had back burning been undertaken earlier in the day, having regard for the explosive nature of the bush and the fact that the fire was throwing ahead considerable distances.

Suggestions regarding the employment of New Australians who are unable to understand the English language or who have no knowledge of local conditions are completely without foundation, as explained in the report.

Investigations into the fire tragedy were made by Det. Sgt. Sullivan. Statements of witnesses and the report of the Detective are being studied by the Coroner, Mr. Stotter, and whilst I have no authoritative information, it is my impression he feels that the Coroner's enquiry would not be warranted.

From my study of the papers, together with my impressions of conditions during a raging bush fire, ~~my view is~~ that whilst there was a regrettable loss of life, the fire itself and the attack upon it were unusual in no respect and therefore no further action is necessary.

Finally, I would add that whilst naturally the preservation of human life is the first consideration, tackling fires always involves risk and there cannot be allowed to develop a psychology that when danger is threatening the only course is to run.


11/3/58


MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

Memo

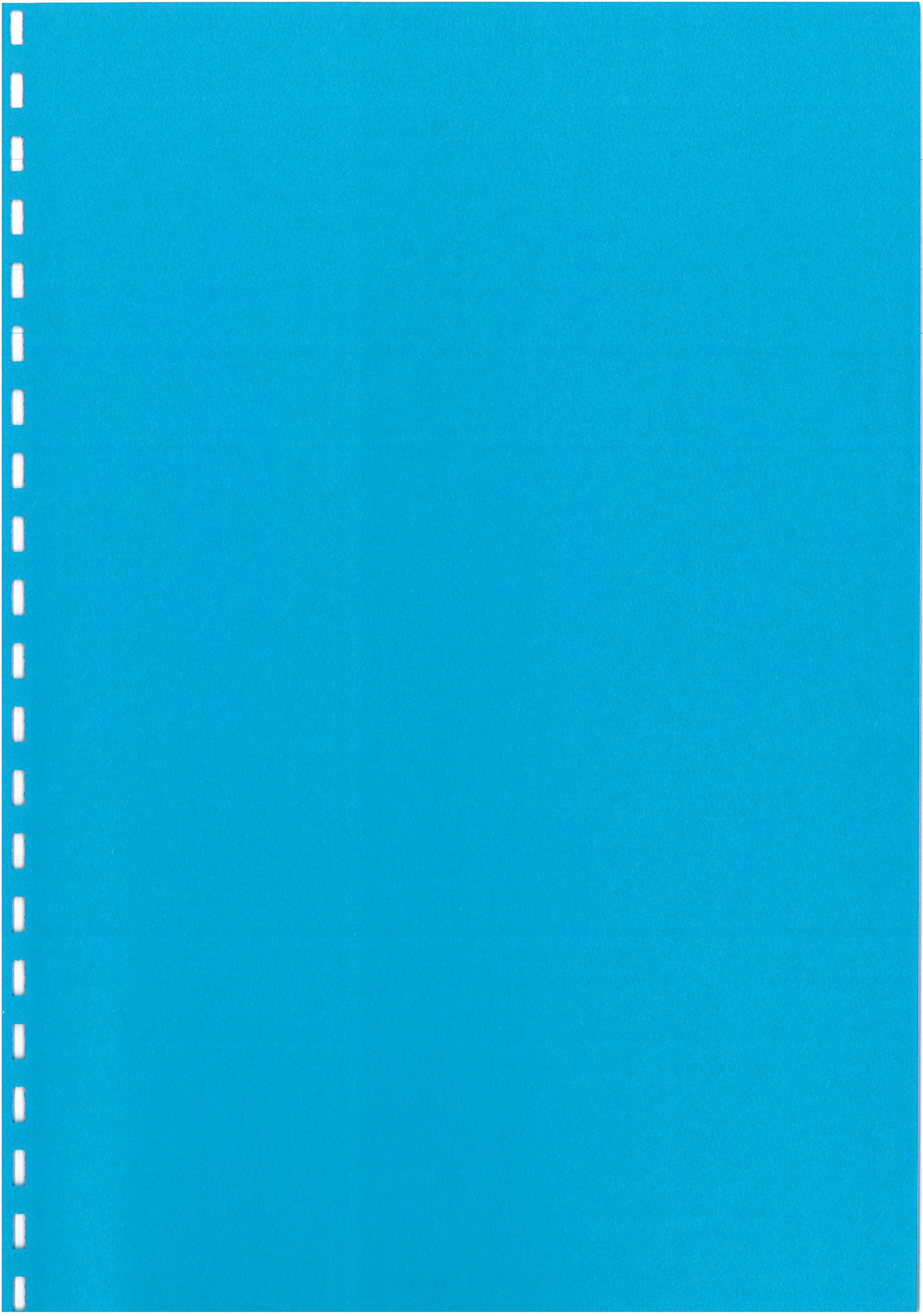
→ sub-file 217/58 now put up in main file 1579/57
These papers v FD File 1579/57 perused
by Mr Golding for some five hours on
21st and 24th inst.


25.3.58


2.4.58.

1-177-1650

MA



CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

With reference to the plans illustrating the position at the Nannup bush fire, attention is drawn to points as under -

1. The relatively slow rate of spread over 24 hours from the time the smoke was first spotted at 11.15 on the 1st January until about 12 noon on the 2nd January. During this period the spread from north to south was less than one mile and from east to west about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile until the last hour when it fanned out to nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ mile. Even up till 2 p.m. the total spread of the fire from north to south was little more than one mile. Between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. under conditions of high temperature, low humidity and a very strong northwest wind, the fire travelled three miles or more throwing ahead continuously. It was during this period of course that it broke through at the south-east corner of the block of country in which it had previously been confined, and overwhelmed the gang of men at that point. Prior to this the most likely point of break-through appeared to be due south of the fire between Reference Trees GX.51/1 and GX.51/2 and it was in this sector that the Forester had concentrated his gang of fresh men from Manjimup.

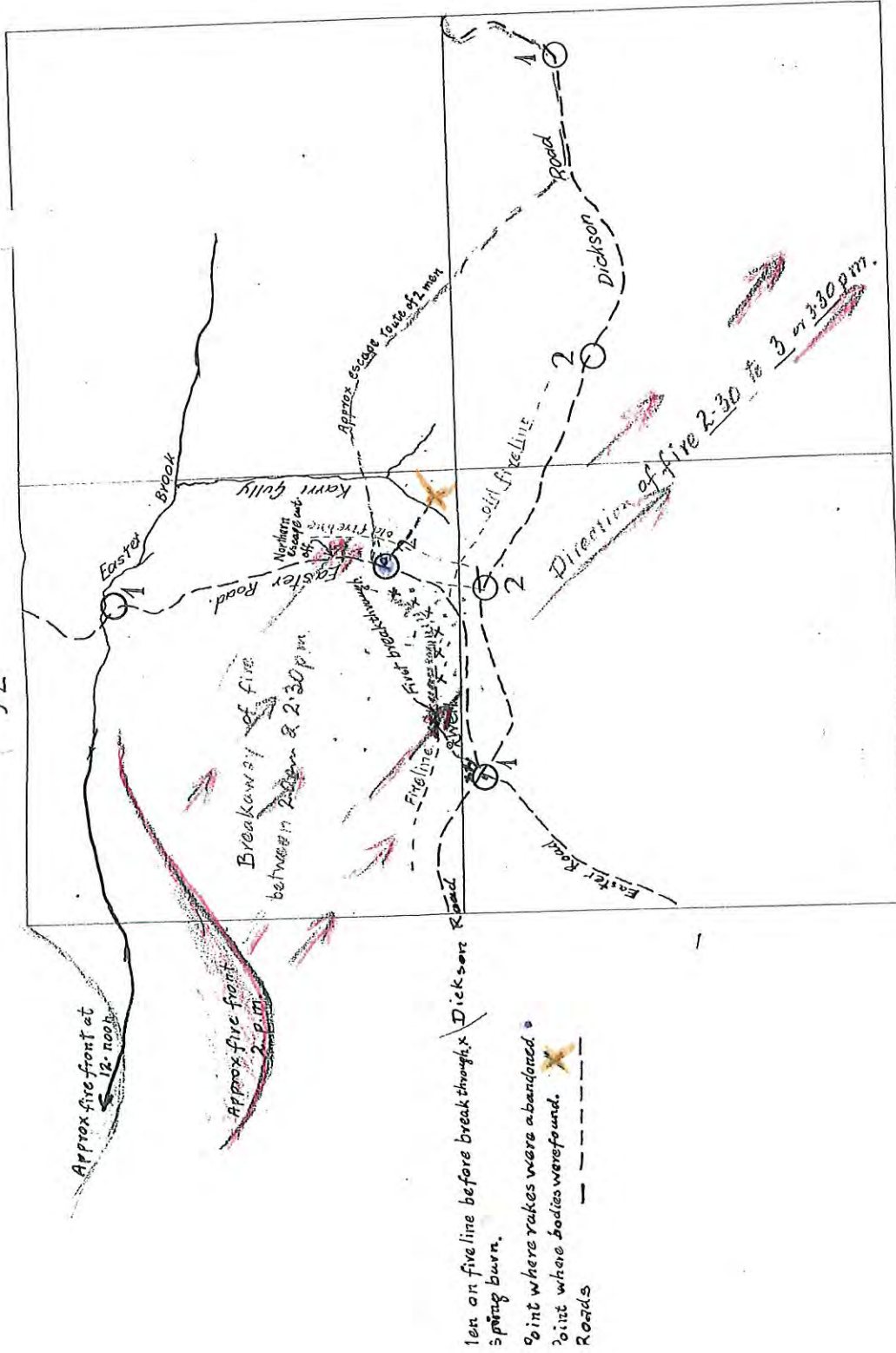
2. After the first break-through of the fire which split the gang in two parts just west of the well, the six men west of this point were without leadership and possibly only one, the elderly McCorkill would have an intimate knowledge of the country. According to the evidence of one survivor, he desired to strike out from the track in a south-south-easterly direction which would have brought him out on to firstly, a fireline and secondly, Dickson Road itself, from which a getaway could have been made to the east. Asst. For. Talbot mentioned that about a quarter-of-an-hour or so after the first break-through, the low loader from Manjimup carrying a bulldozer came through to him along Dickson Road travelling from east to west, indicating that the road was still open although spots of fire were lighting up continuously as the truck came through. This confirms that the escape route along Dickson Road was still open. There seems little doubt that valuable time was lost by the men, firstly in retiring from the fireline to Easter Road and secondly in deciding just where they would go when they found the northern escape route was cut off along Easter Road.

D. R. Stewart
REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT.

7/3/58.
DWRS/PS.

GD
X

GY



Scale - 1" = 20 chains.

LEGEND.

Early Controlled Burning (Before 2nd December).

1st January, 1958.

1. 11.15 - Fire reported, apparently in old burn.

2. 2 p.m. Fire spreading.

2nd January 1958 - Forecast - Fine and hot - mod. to fresh N.W. to S.E. winds and afternoon sea breeze - severe to dangerous.

3. 0715 hrs. Fire position as sketched from tower bearings.

4. 0815 hrs. East face dealt with.

5. 0900 hrs. Fire spreading South with N.E. wind.

6. 1000 hrs. Fire still travelling South.

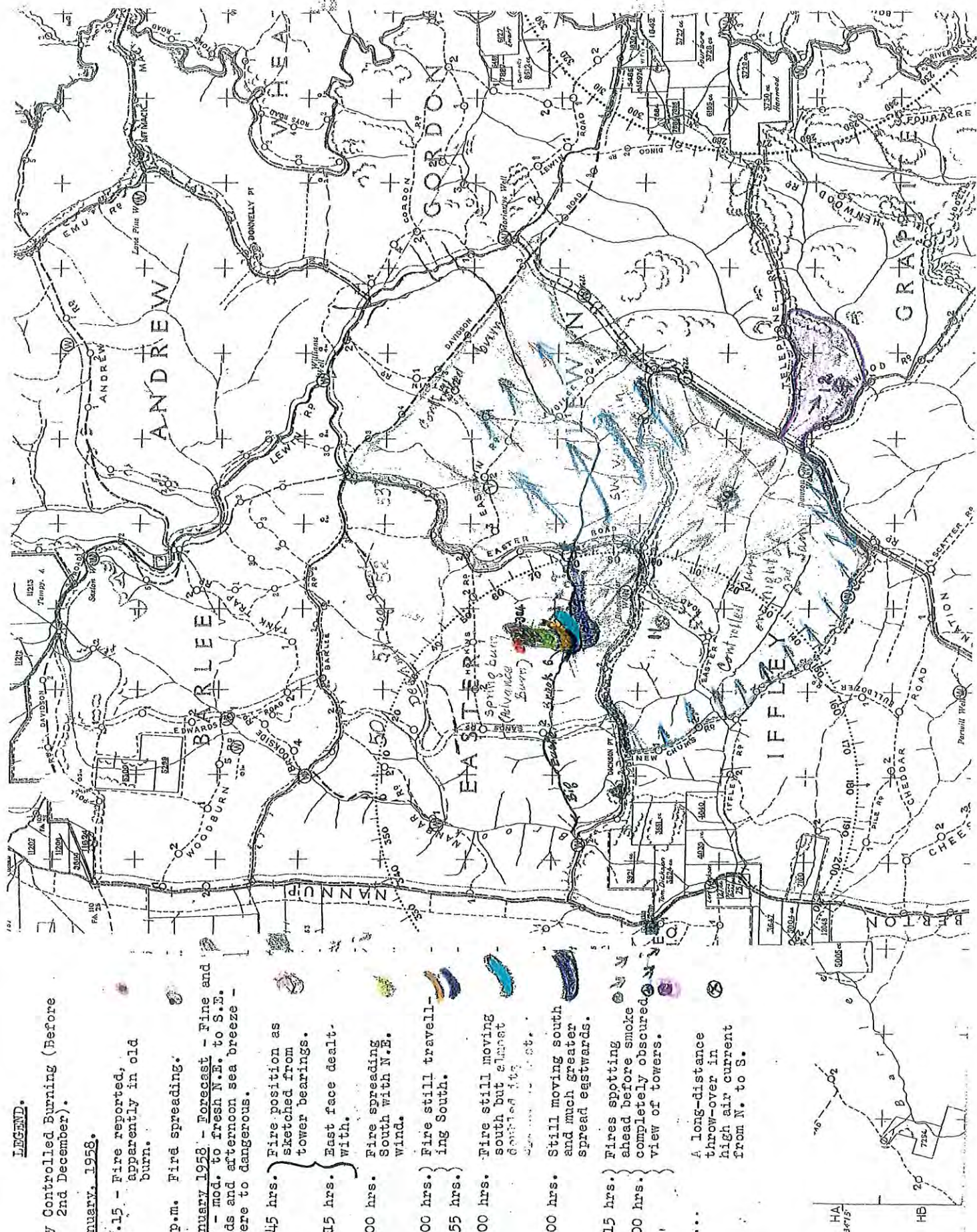
7. 1055 hrs.

8. 1200 hrs. Fire still moving south but almost controlled at 1000 ft.

9. 1400 hrs. Still moving south and much greater spread eastwards.

10. 1415 hrs. Fires spotting ahead before smoke completely obscured view of towers.

11. 1400 hrs. ... A long-distance throw-over in high air current from N. to S.



Preston Road Board - Request for Enquiry.

In connection with the letter of 20/1/58 from the Preston Road Board addressed to the Premier, I would point out that the Police immediately made careful enquiries into the Nannup bushfire tragedy and took detailed statements from workers and staff associated with it. Copies of these are on our file. It is understood that the District Coroner, Mr. Stotter, did not consider that a Coronial enquiry was warranted.

A careful Departmental enquiry was carried out by Regional Superintendent D.W.R. Stewart and Fire Control Superintendent A.J. Milesi. I have carefully studied their reports and all the statements of witnesses, and cannot see that there has been anything which could be classed as negligence or dereliction of duty. A sudden and unexpectedly explosive development of the fire, caused by an unforeseen and unforecast change in weather and wind conditions, resulted in a dangerous situation developing quickly, apparently without anyone - workers or staff - realising the peril, until it was too late. Even then 2 men escaped safely. A large bushfire is very much akin to a battle - the situation at times becomes confused, communications and transport become disorganised, minor strategic or tactical errors of omission or commission can perhaps be pointed to in a later analysis of the situation, made when more facts are available, and there is more time to correlate them without the stress of "battle" and fatigue to cope with. I am satisfied that similar situations have arisen from time to time over the past 40 years of Forests Department fire control, without tragedy occurring. In fact, it has long been a tenet of faith in the Department that such a thing should not be able to happen. Every possible lesson has been drawn from this occurrence by our experts with a view to promulgating them to other field staff. It must be remembered that loss of life in bushfires is occurring annually in all States, and this is our first experience within the Forests Department of such a happening here.

Regarding the complaint about our New Australians being unable to speak English and having little or no knowledge of Australian conditions, from enquiries I learn that the Road Board member who made the remark was basing it on a local railway gang where such was said to be the case.

However, the Forests Department has always been very careful on this score when recruiting men. I ordered an immediate census when the remark was published, and this revealed that our New Australian workers all understood English quite well, and with only 1 or 2 exceptions they also spoke it quite well. Details of every New Australian's capacity in this direction are available for your perusal on our file.

In fact, the Dutchman, Jan Hillinger, who lost his life and was the only New Australian in the gang, probably spoke the best English of anyone in the gang, and his wife and children speak fluent English also. The criticism of the Preston Road Board is without real foundation in this regard.

The obvious reason for the Preston Road Board outburst was to excuse itself from making a contribution to the Bushfire Appeal Fund. Having been a Road Board member for years I know the instinctive reaction on such charitable appeals which come in a never ending stream every year.

The attitude to this appeal would be stronger in a Southwest Road Board where antagonism to the Forests Department appears to be a permanent characteristic of some Road Board members, usually farmers. They all want the forest cleared out and turned into more farms, and lose no opportunity to attack the Forests Department.

Regarding protective burning, the Forests Department annually burns in rotation approximately 400,000 acres of forest country, paying special attention to areas where hazards are high or fire outbreaks are frequent.

Year after year our published annual report shows that farmers burning heads the list of fire causes, regularly causing 20% to 30% of all fires attended by our gangs. The safest place to have a Southwest farm is in State Forest where we are constantly saving farmers from their own carelessness, folly or defiance of the Bushfires Act.

When the large areas of forest are considered the State Forest country burnt by bushfires as such is very small indeed. Reference to the Rural Fires Board would elicit the information that our fire control work is very highly regarded, and I can see no necessity for a public inquiry into our burning policy. We do not burn out other people or we would be regularly receiving claims for compensation - something which you would be aware very rarely happens, and in fact, I know of no case in the past 5 fire seasons.

The policy of the Forests Department on fire control and controlled burning is set out frequently in annual reports. I have never heard of any responsible person querying it, and on the contrary I have received commendation from Southwest identities for having re-introduced widespread controlled burning in 1953, after the rather disastrous period of attempted complete cessation from the use of controlled fire during the 1942-1953 period when many disastrous fires occurred. On my appointment in 1953, the Department returned to the controlled burning policy of the 1922-1942 period of Mr. Kessell's regime.

A. B. Harris

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

27/2/58
ACH:EGV.

98.

THE HON. THE MINISTER FOR FORESTS:

Nannup Fire.

The condensed account herewith of the Nannup fire prepared by Mr. Stewart will give you an over-all concise picture. It is prepared from far more detailed reports, depositions, and analyses of the events of the fire, which are available for your inspection, if desired.

Apart from the unusual tragic aspects, the fire story is fairly representative of many other fires occurring over the years.

We work with relatively small forces of men and equipment over very extensive forest areas, carrying tremendous volumes of inflammable materials. Conditions are made more difficult by dense scrub, tall trees which can carry fire up 100 to 200 ft. into the air, and by difficulties of access away from our widely spaced roads.

There is always the need to realise that manpower reserves cannot be drawn upon too greatly from other districts, leaving them vulnerable.

Our whole system is of necessity based on long experience of probabilities of fire trouble in various localities.

On bad days it is often necessary to rely mainly on night operations, as a fire once it becomes large cannot be effectively tackled by day, during which time forces are marshalled for night attack, and small crews make preparations for backfiring at night, or dog the flanks of the fire, where attack by day is easier or more likely to succeed in delaying its spread.

A. B. Harris

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

27/2/58
ACH:EGV.

44

THE HON. THE MINISTER FOR FORESTS:

Notes forwarded by the Premier from the A.W.U.
concerning allegations about the conduct of
the fire at Easter Block, Nannup.

At my request Regional Superintendent Stewart has supplied the following comments on matters referred to in the rough notes received, and certain comments of my own are interpolated as shown.

1. RATIONS FOR FIRE FIGHTERS.

Mr. Stewart's comment -

"It is customary when a gang is sent to a fire such as this that they take their own rations for at least one and frequently two meals. Some officers always specify a "double crib" when arranging for the departure of a gang for fire fighting. In this case, Assistant Forester Talbot gave the men time to get rations together after notifying them that they would be wanted on the afternoon of 1st January. When out at the fire Assistant Forester Talbot found that some men had taken adequate rations, some a little and one man (possibly more than one) took none at all. However, Talbot informed me that he and some of the other men had a surplus, and gave them to men who were short, and that none went short of rations that night."

Conservator's comment -

This would be in accordance with normal practice in sending men to fires. It has been found from long experience that rations from men's homes are far more palatable to them than iron rations, such as tinned meats, bread, butter and biscuits supplied by the Department. Experience shows that men often lack appetite for food after fire fighting and need something more palatable to tempt them, for which purpose home packed food is far the best.

Food was obtained on the morning of January 2nd from their own homes through Assistant Forester Talbot, and I am satisfied that at no time were the men in the Willow Spring gang without reasonable adequate food, having regard to all the circumstances which pertain to fire fighting. It appears that at least one man did not adequately supply himself in the first place as instructed, and this may have been due to inexperience of fire.

2. PERIOD OF WORK.

Mr. Stewart's comment -

"The men arrived at the fire face about 5 p.m. on the 1st. About 8 p.m. they withdrew to the road, boiled the billy and had a meal. They resumed work about 9 p.m. but as the fire had ceased running and the fire face was difficult to locate by midnight, they withdrew to the road and bedded down until the first light. Assistant Forester Talbot advises they had a cup of tea and some had a bite at midnight and another cup of tea at dawn before returning to the fire face. This would be between 4 and 4.30 a.m. on the 2nd January. About 9 a.m. they withdrew again to the road and awaited Assistant Forester

Co. 7.

reply to A.W.U. Note.
p. 94-97

Talbot who had gone to Willow Spring about 8.30 a.m. for rations after notifying the families at Willow Spring in advance by 'phone. Assistant Forester Talbot returned about 10.45 a.m. and the men had a meal forthwith. They moved away about 11.30 a.m., went South down Easter Road, filled water bags at the brook and were redispersed on the job of fireline raking about 12 noon on the 2nd until the fire broke through about 2.20 or 2.30 p.m."

Conservator's comment -

It must be remembered on the 1st January the men were at home all day and not working until they were called out late in the afternoon and started on the fireline at 5 p.m. They worked for 3 hours, then had an hour's break, a meal, and then worked again for 3 hours when they had another meal, and then bedded down to rest for about 4 hours. Before resuming they had more refreshments, then worked for a period of 4½ hours in the early morning. Then from 9 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. they were resting and during this period received their rations from home. They started again on the fireline at 12 noon and were overwhelmed by the fire at about 2.30 p.m.

These spells of work and the general conditions of operations would be normal at fairly serious fires of this type, and could not be said to impose undue fatigue. It must be remembered that throughout the whole period, including rest time and time taken for meals, these men were being paid at overtime rates. Other gangs and heavy equipment were being organised and got to the fire, and in normal circumstances they would have been relieved later that afternoon had they not been overwhelmed by the fire. With limited manpower and under the trying conditions prevailing it was probably not possible to arrange for an early release and reserves were even then being drawn from neighbouring divisions who also had their own fire control problems.

It has been the experience of many officers of this Department right up to and including myself of having spent stretches of two or three days at a time at such fires with far less food, rest or sleep and with just as much physical effort getting around the fire on foot and directing operations, so that fatigue factors are wellknown to the staff and are never lost sight of.

3. RELIEF GANGS.

Mr. Stewart's comment -

"About 7 p.m. on the evening of the 1st January, Assistant Forester Talbot reported that the fire was in dirty country and he would need further assistance. Arrangements were made that night for the Barlee Brook gang of six men to reinforce the Willow Spring gang at first light the next morning. (Actually the Barlee gang came out two hours earlier than necessary and bedded down until the first light). Assistant Forester Talbot was also informed at 7 p.m. that if he could contact Barlee settlement (a few miles away) they could probably satisfy ration requirements if necessary.

At 8.15 on the morning of the 2nd. Assistant Forester Talbot advised by 'phone that his men had been unable to completely surround the fire and further support would be necessary.

Meanwhile, a more senior officer, District Forester Pears had himself left for the fire and Manjimup was alerted to have at least one gang and a bulldozer sent out. On

receipt of District Forester Pears' report by 'phone following his quick appreciation of the position, Manjimup was asked to despatch both the gang and the bulldozer. The Glenoran gang arrived at approximately 1200 hours, and the bulldozer at approximately 2.30 p.m. just after the break through of the fire. Once the break through had occurred between 2 and 2.30 p.m. there was little or nothing that could be done until conditions eased in the evening, hence the two gangs from Nannup were not sent out until about 6 p.m. Arrangements were also made for a further gang from Yanmah in the Manjimup Division and for a second bulldozer."

Conservator's comment -

I think this adequately answers the suggestion that no help was received but the magnitude of the fire made it impossible to completely relieve men from any special sector.

I see nothing abnormal in the dispositions of force which were made for attacking this fire on January 2nd. When the fire broke through at about 2.30 p.m. it was obvious that nothing more could be done on that front until the cool of the evening arrived and arrangements were made for a concentrated attack during the night, which proved completely successful.

4. POSSIBLE BURNING OF BREAK FROM EASTER ROAD.

Mr. Stewart's comment -

"This was a possible alternative suggested by Assistant Forester Talbot to Nannup when he rang at 8.15 a.m. on the 2nd. This was a matter of tactics under the weather conditions prevailing. Any additional lighting would have been undesirable if there was a chance of containing the original fire, and the position could only be judged on its merits by the officer directly in charge of operations. As District Forester Pears was going straight out it was a matter for his decision and with the forecast as given, it was expected that this work could be done in the late afternoon and evening. The disposition of the gang was therefore made by himself and Assistant Forester Talbot with this in sight. However, the weather change came in 12 to 24 hours earlier than the Weather Bureau anticipated with the result that the wind veered to the Northwest and West with gale force causing the fire to develop with tremendous rapidity contrary to the conditions as forecast. Had an attempt been made to burn back from Easter Road during the morning of the 2nd, it may or may not have improved the position. In the light of subsequent weather developments, it is almost certain that before the back fire had penetrated any distance, the main fire would still have come through at tremendous pace and thrown well ahead once the high Northwest wind developed. From my knowledge of the country and experience of fires therein, I feel fairly certain that a complete breakaway would have occurred. Whether or not there would have been any fatalities would of course have depended on the disposition of the various individuals at the time of breakaway."

Conservator's comment -

It is very easy to suggest improved tactics about 24 hours later when the weather and other facts are definitely known, but it is not so easy to forecast, nor can officers ignore the official forecasts of weather behaviour. Had they ignored them and turned out wrong they could equally have been accused of making an exactly opposite error. The individual

fire fighter on the fireline is rarely able to get an over-all strategic picture of a large fire.

District Forester Pears is an extremely conscientious man of long and great experience, unlikely to be matched by members of the gang or even Assistant Forester Talbot who is a relatively junior officer.

The way things turned out, the suggested back fire would not have sufficed to stop the fire which developed in the crowns of the trees and overwhelmed the gang. It must be remembered that at its height, when the fire suddenly exploded, ash and pieces of charred bark were carried ~~out~~ right up into the air, and were reported to be dropping as far away as Pemberton, approximately 20 miles. Long experience has shown that in dense high forest and under the conditions that apparently prevailed on January 2nd, back firing in the daytime is a very two-edged sword. In any case it was not the failure to back fire which caused the tragedy, but the failure of men and staff alike to realise that a suddenly explosive situation was developing. Had this been realised, say even 5 minutes earlier, everyone could have withdrawn safely. It can only be assumed that the extremely dangerous situation developed with unexpected suddenness.

I need hardly say that this tragedy has been a profound shock to all officers of the Department, and that every possible lesson which can be drawn from the occurrence will be passed on to all members of the Department and steps taken with a view to obviating an occurrence.

In the Department's long history of fire fighting extending over 40 years there have been many narrow escapes and officers are not unaware of the hazards involved in forest fire fighting. These have been experienced by workers and staff alike right up to the very highest ranks of the Department.

A.B. Harris

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

27/2/58
ACH:EGV.

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.Fire Deaths - Easter Block - Nannup Division.

A telephone message from Nannup about 9.30 a.m. on Friday the 3rd January, reported the death of four men trapped by fire the previous day. Following a detailed enquiry with Fire Control Superintendent Milesi, I have to report as under. (Plans attached).

1. On Wednesday the 1st January, a fire was reported in Easter Block at a point approximately half mile south of G.W. 51/1. Assistant Forester Talbot took the overseer and 7 men from Willow Spring about 3 p.m. and reached the fire face some 30 chains south of Hopkins Road about 5 p.m.

2. While the gang worked around the eastern face of the fire, A/F. Talbot reconnoitred the burning area, reported the position to Nannup about 7 p.m. by telephone from Dickson Tower, and said further assistance would be required.

3. The gang worked around the fire face until midnight except for a tea break of an hour or so between 8 and 9 p.m. By this time the fire had died out except for odd patches, the face could not be followed and cut-off salients would not burn.

4. At midnight A/F. Talbot withdrew the gang and they bedded down on the road to renew the attack at dawn, reinforced by the Barlee gang (6 men) sent out in response to the request of the previous evening.

5. At 8.15 a.m. on the 2nd January, A/F. Talbot reported by 'phone to Nannup that the two gangs had failed to surround the fire and that with the current forecast (severe approaching dangerous) more men and equipment would be required. He was instructed to return to Willow Spring for food supplies for his men and informed that further reinforcements would be sent out.

6. Meanwhile, the fire was becoming quite active and some time after 9 a.m. the gangs withdrew to the road and awaited the return of A/F. Talbot at 10.45 a.m. when they again had a meal

7. Following the 7.45 a.m. weather forecast and the 8.15 a.m. report from A/F. Talbot, District Forester Pears left immediately from Nannup to make an appreciation of the situation while further arrangements were made for gangs, bulldozers and power pumpers from Nannup, Glenoran and Jarrahwood. The fire was in an area approximately 2 miles by 2 miles surrounded by tracks from which an advance burn had been carried out on the 2nd and 3rd December, but barely 50% of the area had burned. A quick reconnaissance by D/For. Pears indicated weaknesses along the south and east boundaries. The west and north boundaries had been well burned to a depth of half to 1 mile. With a forecast of east to north-east winds with a late afternoon sea breeze (i.e. from the south-west) it appeared that the fire would progress only very slowly against the wind in the easterly direction, but could possibly break out on the south boundary if the wind persisted from the northeast.

8. D/For. Pears reported the position to Nannup, and realising the impossibility of surrounding the fire by day, withdrew both gangs down Easter Road to prepare firelines on the south

boundary from which to back burn in the late afternoon when a southwestern breeze was expected. Following their morning meal, the men were redispersed at 12 noon along a fireline at the south-east of this block. At this time a fresh gang had arrived from Glenoran and it was placed a mile or so further west where it was anticipated the fire might first reach the boundary of the block.

9. The tower log book indicates that from 11 a.m. onwards the wind was moving round from northeast to north and northwest, although as in the morning it was still very light. By about 1.45 p.m. it was apparent to D/For. Pears that the wind was settling in the northwest and if it freshened, the fire would reach the sector held by the Willow Spring gang. He therefore instructed Overseer Rising with one man to clear the approach and access to a waterhole so that it would be readily available for filling pumper units. The heavy duty driver was sent back to bring his unit forward. Wind strength now increased greatly and the fire appeared to be approaching rapidly with heavy smoke rising high. The fire still seemed to be from half to one mile distant. Realising that if any back firing were to be successful it must be commenced immediately, D/For. Pears instructed the overseer to commence lighting back from the fireline north and west of Easter Road and he went further west for the Glenoran gang.

10. From this point the descriptions are somewhat confused as events moved with amazing speed, following a great increase in wind strength from the northwest.

The Willow Spring gang was spread out along the raked fireline with Overseer Rising at the western end and McCorkill at the eastern extremity, perhaps 300 or 400 yards away. Valentine started lighting with Overseer Rising patrolling closely, and as he proceeded eastwards, further men in the gang were patrolling the sections lit. Lighting had been proceeding for a bare 5 to 10 minutes and the back fire was moving in quite freely when Valentine noticed fires spotting up behind him on unburnt country and he called to the other men to deal with the "hop-overs". Several were put out, but as flying embers from the main fire were starting fires with increasing frequency behind them, it was obvious that any further back firing was useless and one man ran back to tell the overseer. However, he was cut off by flames both sides of the track and could not get through to Overseer Rising. He returned to the men and the group immediately decided to get out by crossing the four or five chain strip to Easter Road.

Valuable time was lost when Butler returned to the fireline to get McCorkill not knowing that McCorkill had already retired to the road at a point further east. Cut off from the overseer and two men to the west the apparent escape route was in the other direction along Easter Road where it turned north, but it was found that this had also been cut off by an advancing tongue of fire. With high wind roaring overhead and numerous spots lighting up to the southeast a quick decision was necessary as to the best way out. McCorkill wished to strike southeast and had he done so he would have come out on Dickson Road within 10 or 15 chains and probably got clear. However Valentine desired to cut across the line of wind direction striking out to the northeast. He therefore struck out followed by K. Barrett. Although the going through scrub was very heavy they succeeded in crossing a small karri gully some 15 chains from the road, ascended high ground the other side where the scrub density decreased somewhat, and they were able to circle back to Dickson Road. The other four men struck out in an east southeasterly direction and were overwhelmed after going a bare 16 chains. They had just crossed the head of a small gully where scrub growth was very heavy.

11. The remainder of the gang including the overseer and A/F. Talbot withdrew by Dickson Road to the west. Two of them,

Talbot and Rising had to make their way through a short section of a few yards where fire was burning both sides of the road after the first breakthrough. They thought at that time, that the rest of the men would be able to withdraw northwards along Easter Road and were not unduly worried about them. They were not to know that this northern escape route had been cut off by another major tongue of fire.

12. The time of this extreme fire activity and breakthrough cannot be fixed accurately, but was sometime between 2.20 and 2.40 p.m. About 3 p.m. A/F. Talbot sent Rising around the fire to the west and north then south down Easter Road to seek the cut off gang. They travelled south on Easter Road almost as far as Easter Brook where the fire was raging across the road on both sides of the brook, but shouts failed to locate the missing men. Meanwhile A/F. Talbot went southwest along Easter Road, southeast along Iffley Road, northeast along Coronation Road with the object of looking for the men on the eastern section of Dickson Road. However he found that the head fire was burning close to Coronation Road more than two miles ahead of the breakthrough point, and fearing he would be cut off if he went further he returned to the new base near the junction of Sands and Dickson Roads.

13. About 5.50 p.m. the main group was joined by two of the missing men, i.e. Valentine and Barrett. It appears that after breaking out ahead of the fire they had circled back to Dickson Road, walked eastwards to its junction with Coronation Road and then sometime later after the heat of the fire had passed, they walked back along Dickson Road some $\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the new base. These two men feared the worst, i.e. that their mates had been caught in the fire, although it was felt by others that they had probably escaped in another direction and would turn up on some other road.

14. After 6.30 p.m., A/F. Talbot and the Willow Spring men returned to Easter Road to resume the search for the four missing men. They eventually found their abandoned rakes near the road, but it was then too dark to proceed with further searching and they returned to base at 8 p.m.

15. During the night no organised search was deemed possible as D/For. Pears considered the risk of losing men in the dark was too great. His whole attention was then concentrated on the strategy and tactics to contain the fire by burning from existing roads during the night while conditions were mild. In the course of this work, A/F. Talbot penetrated a number of roads such as Eastwin and Jubilee in the hopes of picking up footprints of the missing men in patches of soft soil or sand wherever such areas appeared on sections of these roads. The results were negative.

By dawn the Willow Spring men had been out for one day and two nights and were relieved at 7 a.m. by a Jarrahwood gang. However they did not wish to return until their missing mates were located. A/For. Talbot resumed the search with Forest Guard Vince, commencing from the spot where the rakes were found, and within half-an-hour he found the bodies of the missing men. At 9.30 a.m. he reported by 'phone to Nannup that the bodies had been found and requested that arrangements be made to inform the settlement before the return of the men.

Arrangements for search parties from Nannup were cancelled.

During the next three days of enquiry, close contact was maintained with the local police and visiting Detective Sergeant Sullivan who visited the scene of the tragedy in the company of the men concerned and took detailed statements from these men. Copies of these appear on the file.

13/2/58.
DWRS/PS.

REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT.



85.

PREMIER'S DEPARTMENT
PERTH

11th February, 1958.

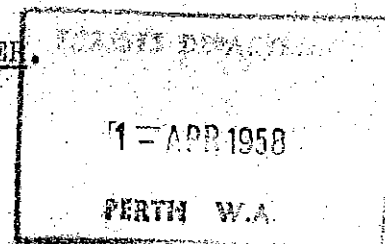
HON. MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

The attached letter from the Branch Secretary, W.A. Branch, Australian Workers' Union (Mr. Golding) is forwarded for your consideration. As you will see from the letter, Mr. Golding on behalf of his Union has requested that an early and full enquiry be carried out in connection with the tragic fire which occurred at Willow Springs and in which four forestry employees lost their lives.

I understand that representatives of the A.W.U. would be anxious to give evidence before the suggested enquiry.

You have already, I understand, given some consideration to the suggestion for an enquiry following the forwarding by me to you of other correspondence, one of the letters being from the Nannup Road Board.

M.A.
PREMIER.



BRANCH SECRETARY: C. H. GOLDING

MINING DIVISION SECRETARY: F. W. COLLARD 84

AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' UNION

Westralian Branch

SECRETARY'S RESIDENCE
PHONE MW 496

CHG/NW

17-19 JAMES STREET, PERTH
PHONES: B 2725 : BA 5765

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS
UNION. PERTH

6th February, 1958.

Mr. A.R.G. Hawke,
Hon. Premier,
Premiers Department,
Treasury Buildings,
PERTH...W.A.

Dear Sir,

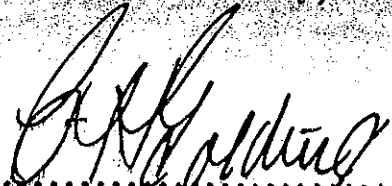
I learnt from Mr. Stewart, a senior Officer of the Forestry Department, yesterday that there was to be no enquiry (Coronial or otherwise) in connection with the recent Willow Springs fire disaster.

Mr. Stewart informed me that the Police Officer in charge at Nannup and a Police Sergeant from Perth, together with Forestry Department Officials, made an inspection of the area the day following the tragic fire and they were satisfied that there was no necessity for any further enquiries.

The A.W.U. cannot accept this decision of the Police and the Forestry Officials, particularly in view of a report handed to you by me which made specific allegations of negligence on the part of the Department.

Having regard to the result of the enquiries made by the late Mr. Jack Walsh who visited the area the week following the fire, I respectfully request that the Government call for an early and full enquiry concerning the tragic fire.

Yours faithfully,



.....
BRANCH SECRETARY, A.W.U.
W.A. BRANCH.

HON. MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

The attached letter from the Preston Road Board, regarding the recent tragic bush fire in the forestry area at Nannup, is forwarded for your consideration and report, please.

30th January, 1958.

Ad.
PREMIER.

PRESTON ROAD BOARD

(HEALTH, VERMIN AND CEMETERY BOARD)

79

PHONE 16 - P.O. BOX 11

BOARD MEETINGS:

THIRD ~~XXXXXX~~ EACH MONTH.

Thursday

Please address all communications
to the Secretary.

Donnybrook.
W.A.

20th. January, 1958.

Hon. A. R. G. Hawk, M. L. A.,
Premier,
Premiers Department.
PERTH.....W.A.

Dear Sir,

At the last meeting of my Board I was instructed to request that a Public enquiry be held into the causes of the recent tragic bush fire at Nannup, which resulted in the loss of the lives of four forestry men.

It was also decided to include in the enquiry the Forestry Department's policy regarding protective burning and the employment of New Australians who apart from being unable to speak English, have little or no knowledge of Australian conditions.

Trusting you will give this matter your urgent attention.

Yours faithfully,

George

SECRETARY.

HON. MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

The attached notes were handed to me recently by the General Secretary of the A.W.U. (Mr. Golding).

He prepared the notes from some which he discovered in the clothing of the late Jack Walsh immediately following the death by motor accident of Mr. Walsh when he was returning from Nannup to Perth.

The first part of the statement appears on the surface to be very serious and I would desire you to have the matter thoroughly investigated.

I would also like to have a report from you as early as practicable regarding the second part of the statement.

30th January, 1958.

As.
PREMIER.

WILLOW SPRINGS.

Fire at Easter Block, 20 from Willow Springs. East of ~~Dixon Tower~~ ~~Doxon Fowler~~.

O. Pears in charge. J. Talbot assisting F.O.

W. Rising, J. Valentine, J. McCrone, R. Thomas, K. Barrett, J. Talbot Jnr.

Deceased J. Hilliger. J.F.W. Butler, R. Johnson, G. McCorkhill.

Jan. 2nd . Jan 1st. 3 p.m. to Jan 3rd 7 a.m. Jan 2nd about 2.30 p.m.

No Rations from Department. First rations on job 10.45 a.m. on 2nd supplied by own families.

Men were fatigued and should have been relieved early on morning of second.

Only breaks were 1 hour at 8 p.m. on 1st, and break of 3 hours between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. on 2nd.

10.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. on 2nd.

Plenty of relief available from Nannup and other centres but received none, until 6 p.m. on 2nd. Messini's Gang from Nannup.

Had break off fire been burnt from Easter Road in morning of 2nd which was requested by J. Talbot and refused by Officer in charge. At Nannup it is the opinion of all men in gang this tragedy would not have happened.

~~Palgarup Boarding??~~

W. Rising. All financial.

All men put in for transfers.

All matters communicate with W. Rising.

Nothing being done about matters brought up some time ago.

Fences want repairing, drainage still bad, drainage under house, wash house water not drained away. Roofs still leaking, several ? houses without

windows, some floors require repairing. Nothing yet done about sanitary.

Several holes in walls. Stove at W. Rising's place requires bricking in,

Front steps repairs.

75.
MR. STEWART.

RE FURNITURE AND EFFECTS OF MRS. BUTLER, -
WIDOW OF LATE EMPLOYEE OF WILLOW SPRINGS.

A Mr. Litton rang at 9.15, on 20th January, on behalf of Mrs. Butler. He informed me that he understood that the Forests Department would be arranging transport of her goods to Perth. He said that he was at Willow Springs on Saturday and brought Mrs. Butler to Perth. Mrs. Butler's address is temporarily 41 Monger Street, Perth.

Her goods are already packed, but a number of items are in small packages, as they had insufficient cases to hold them and for that reason, he wanted to know if it would be possible for these goods to be brought to Perth by road. The goods will be required at 35 Francis Street, Bayswater, where Mrs. Butler intends to live.

Mr. Litton was in touch with Assistant Forester Talbot at Willow Springs, and says that he has the key of the cottage and understands the position.

Mr. Litton can be contacted through the day at M2427, or in the evening at F1795.

W. E. Brockway
REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT.

GEB:IEB
20.1.58.

NOTE.

Mr. Reid. Will you please ring this message through to Manjimup, please.

Nannup

W. E. B.

*Gill's Transport gave special quote for this job
£34 - accepted.*

Will arrive at Willow Springs 10am Wednesday

22nd inst. - Nannup advised to arrange

Deliver goods at Bayswater Thursday morning

23rd inst. - Mr Litton advised

Noted D. 22/1/58

20/1/58

BOARD SEEKS WHOLE FIRE STORY

BUNBURY, Fri: Preston Road Board will ask the Premier for a public inquiry into the Nannup fire tragedy.

It will ask also that the Forests Department explain its policy of protective burning.

Preston decided this when Nannup Road Board asked it for a donation to assist the families of the fire victims.

A donation would be sent when the "full facts of the matter" were received.

Members expressed concern at the number of new Australians (who cannot speak English) employed by the Forests Department.

Fire-fighting was hampered in many instances because the new Australians could not follow directions, they said.

• Four Willow Springs forestry workers were burnt to death on January 8

Winnipeg

Withdrawn *from Mr. Wallace*
Date *29th Jan 58*
For *Response*
PLEASE RETURN EARLY
Returned
73798/3/54-3M

McLeaunt

DISTRICT POLICE OFFICE
58/72
16 JANUARY, 1958
BUNBURY W.A.

COPY from C.L.D. 658/58

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The Clerk of Courts, Bunbury.

For information of the District Coroner
please.

(Sgd.) R. Parker.
District Police Officer.

In view of the extensive inquiry by
departmental officers and the police no good purpose
would be served by holding an inquest.

17.1.58

(Sgd.) L.W. Stotter

S.M.

The Under Secretary for Law,
Perth.

Forwarded for your information.

(Sgd.) R.T. Sholl
Clerk of Courts, Bunbury.

17.1.1958.

615
2/4/58

Easter Block Fire - Fire Study -
January 1958.

I have perused the report, pages 32 to 41 prepared by Mr. Milesi and was present with him when the great majority of this material was obtained from the personnel concerned.

Comment is offered as under --

1. The prime cause of failure to contain this fire before "blow-up" conditions were experienced was due to under-estimation by the duty officer of its rate of spread and difficulty of attack in the country concerned. This resulted in employment of resources which were generally too little and too late.

2. Factors which contributed to this under-estimation were -

(a) The season's fire map on the wall in which yellow pencil shading indicated the extent of the spring burn (tracing attached). This shading is rather more diagrammatic than accurate. It was placed on the plan by the overseer who did the burning, at D/Forester Pears' request and indicates a fairly well burnt north and western portion with a thin perimeter burn of from 1/8" to 3/16" in width along the south, i.e. 10 to 15 chains. D/For. Pears who was controlling burning operations had of course, discussed it with the overseer and knew that it was a very unsatisfactory burn on the south and east, some patches running in very little distance, less than a chain in places. The duty officer however, did not have this information.

(b) The occurrence of two small smokes earlier in the month which fizzled out and were apparently due to

M. J. Stewart
Secretary

pp 65-76
88

(2) small patches getting alight within the earlier burning. Thus when the small smoke was first reported on the 1st instant, investigation was arranged instead of immediate attack.

(c) Inaccuracy of Forecast.

The forecast for Thursday, January 2nd given at 1615 on the afternoon of the 1st was much the same as that for January 1st, i.e. high summer with northeast to southeast winds. There was no indication therefore that night, that the weather would be any worse than it was on Jan. 1st, when the fire was apparently travelling slowly and making slow progress. Even the next morning at 0745 hours although the forecast had been amended from high summer to severe approaching dangerous, the wind direction was still given as northeast to southeast with afternoon sea breeze. In other words, the Weather Bureau did not expect the trough to pass over the coast with consequent peak fire hazard conditions and a strong northwest wind. Even as late as 1615 hours on Thursday the 2nd, the forecast given ^{for 3rd Jan} really described conditions on the current day, i.e. the 2nd, and gave a 'dangerous' hazard for the 3rd. In actual fact, the peak was reached at 2 to 2.30 p.m. on the 2nd and by the 3rd, conditions had ameliorated to such an extent that the hazard was only high summer again, as evidenced by the morning forecast at 0745 hours. (This is a repetition of almost exactly similar conditions for the big Ellis Creek fire which occurred in 1953).

[The change with a violent northwest wind came in some 24 hours before it was predicted giving dangerous conditions in which the fire literally "blew-up" although the morning forecast had been northeast to southeast winds with afternoon sea breeze.

(3)

(d) The fact that 35 points of rain fell on the 27th and 3 points on the 29th may have led to a feeling that the extremely dry conditions of the month had ^{been} alleviated to some extent, and the rate of spread would not be excessive.

3. Failure to issue a warning order for a stand-by gang after the investigating unit had been dispatched. This meant that the Willow Spring gang was probably an hour later leaving its base than would have been the case, and was not fully prepared in advance with ration requirements for one or two meals in the bush.

4. Failure to ensure a full scale dawn attack after the Asst. Forester's report at 1900 hours that a 'dozer would be required or a lot of men if the 'dozer were not available. In this connection, the ^(i.e. from the fire) reporting officer may not have given a very clear picture and apparently did not emphasise the difficulty of dealing with this fire in that particular type of country. ~~Had the forecast for the ensuing day been dangerous with a northwest wind, it is almost certain that strenuous efforts would have been made to have bulldozers and men on the fire front by 4 a.m.~~ As it was, when the duty officer learnt that the only two available low loaders in the town had departed elsewhere and there were no trucks heavy enough to carry the T.D.9, he did not consider it sufficiently urgent to approach another Division so late at night and left such approach until the morning. (Transport could have been provided both from Manjimup and Ludlow had officers at these centres been roused from their beds that evening or word sent to the F.C.S. or Regional Superintendent).

5. After departure of the first gang, there was apparently no action to alert a second gang although no doubt one or two gangs could have been raised at Nannup that night to come out at dawn the next morning if required. The alerting of gangs to be used for relief for men at the fire is essential if there is to be reasonable continuity of operations at the fire face.

6. On the morning of the 2nd, there seems to have been some error in tactics at the fire when it was tackled at dawn. 68

A/F. Talbot sent the Willow Spring gang around the eastern face which is the one that had been active the previous day and the Barlee gang around the western face with the intention that the two would link up on the southern end. However, although Talbot

may not have known it at the time, it seems that all the north and western sides were well burnt and the fire was running out in the burnt country, where in many patches it burnt a second time for widths of possibly several chains in scrub previously scorched by the early burn. Therefore the Barlee gang may have wasted considerable time moving around this western face when the south and the east were the ones which really needed urgent attention. Whether or not they would have surrounded the fire by both working down the eastern face, i.e. one gang as a flying crew to knock out anything alight and the second gang mopping-up, is open to question, but in the light of present knowledge it is felt that probably they would have surrounded it.

7. As far as is known, the duty officer has not had first-hand experience of organisation for a large fire in this heavy scrub country. In contrast to the more open jarrah country further north, night work at such a fire may be quite ineffective, as the fire ceases to run, blacks out, and it is extremely difficult to follow a perimeter. Experience over many years has shown that the only effective night work is that done by a bulldozer with a few men to follow up and patrol faces already held. All man-power should be saved for a heavy attack at first light, i.e. about 4.30 a.m. and their work will be far more effective during the ensuing four hours than anything they can accomplish overnight. Furthermore as the fire peters out at night, the last few chains covered by it rarely if ever, ignite any trees and the perimeter mopping-up next morning is much easier as it rarely has dangerous burning trees close to the fire edge.

Although there was a considerable under-estimate of

that with the prevailing conditions of forecast and advance burn as shown on the fire map, probably most junior or inexperienced officers could have committed the same error, certainly most senior officers in the past have not been guiltless of similar errors of judgement until they learnt to throw everything at the first sign of smoke once the summer had really commenced and the mild spring conditions were past.

Recommendations.

1. Fire Weather Forecast.

The uncertainty of a build-up for a dangerous day may extend over 24 hours or more. If there is any chance whatever of the dangerous day developing, it is felt that the forecast should err in this direction. An over-estimate is less likely to lead to trouble than an under-estimate, (although we have had some criticism from saw-millers when we have stopped locos. running on what was expected to be a dangerous day only to have an early change give relief and the hazard turn out to be only average or high summer.)

2. That once a fire is reported during a non-working period such as a weekend or holiday, the duty officer should immediately alert one or two more staff men and additional gangs even if subsequent developments prove they are not required.

3. That all divisional staff be impressed with the fact that the resources for fire-fighting are not restricted to their own division. They can always get assistance from other divisions through the F.C.S. or Regional Superintendent, (if not by direct contact with an adjoining Division.)

4. That the question of the use of operational orders be again considered. The Manual sets out what shall be done when there is an initial outbreak but it is felt that each divisional officer should be given instruction in operational orders and invited to write his own operational orders for various hypothetical fires in order that he will

(6) not overlook points in organisation when faced with critical outbreaks.

X Perhaps one of the most effective ways of instructing junior officers would be to take case histories of disastrous fires, show the chronological sequence of fire development and action taken and show plainly where our organisation broke down or was ineffective. Usually in such cases it was a matter of too little too late and this was often the result of a forecast which failed to detect the approaching critical day.

D. M. Stewart
REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT.

16/1
14/1/58.
DWRS/PS.

N.B. Re Controlled Burning.

An examination of this virgin forest, severely fire-damaged in past decades, indicates the great variation in the type of burn obtained with changes in vegetation type.

Striking due south over reasonably level ground from Hopkins Road to locate the point of origin of the fire, the first 15 chains had had a very mild and patchy burn through undergrowth of wattle (*ac. strigosa*) etc. about 6' to 8' high, crowns were not scorched, patches were unburnt and where fire had run under the scrub much of it was only scorched, and could carry a fire again in dangerous weather. The next 12 to 16 chains were severely scorched, and scrub burnt off to the mineral soil. It had been mostly ti-tree (*Agonis parviceps*), grass, trees etc. Beyond that the burn had been good and crowns were again green up to the point of origin of the fire.

DS
R.S.

FORESTS DEPARTMENT

Nannup Office,

To Conservator of Forests, 9th January 1958.
Forests Department, Western Australia.
Perth.

Reference—H.O.
Local 8/9.

SUBJECT: Statements in Connection with Easter Block Fire.

For attention Regional Superintendant Southern Region.

Please find attached copies of the statements made by the following witnesses to the police after the recent Nannup tragedy.

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| I.G. Morison. | A.D.F.O. |
| O.S. Pears. | District Forester. |
| J.A. Talbot. | Assistant Forester. |
| W.A.G. Rising. | Overseer. |
| J.F. Gale. | Overseer. |
| K.J. Barrett. | Forest Workman. |
| J.S. Valentine. | " " |

I.G. Morison
A.D.F.O.

IGM/MAL.

Conservator O as mentioned in the last para of my report dated 1.2.58, hereunder, find copies of statements taken by the Police.

14/2 Stewart + app's. 13.1.58

13/1

(2) Pgs 32 to 41 - See my comments following fire study report by Mr. Miles. 25

16.1.58

①

62

Ian George MORISON.

States.

I am an Assistant Divisional Forest Officer employed by the Forests Department, Nannup and am stationed at Nannup. I am Officer in Charge.

I am aged 29 years.

I graduated as a Bachelor of Science in Forestry and a Dip. of Forestry at Canberra. I received my diploma at the beginning of 1952 and my degree at the beginning of 1953.

I was appointed to the staff of the Forest Department, 15/6/52, and was appointed a D.F.O. (Asst) same date.

I was appointed to Nannup after serving in several south-west divisions in 1954.

On Wednesday morning the 1st of January, 58 at about 11.15, Dickson Tower at Barlee Brook and Carlotta Tower, east of Nannup made a report that smoke had been sighted east of Barlee Brook and two men from Barlee Brook had been despatched to investigate and report.

The mentioned Towers reported approximately about noon that the fire was burning slightly east.

The fire hazard for the Karri region was high and this would affect this region.

At approximately 2 pm no report had been received from the reconnaissance party and Assistant Forester Talbot of Willow Spring was instructed to gather his men at Willow Spring and proceed to the fire. Some short time later the reconnaissance party reported that the fire was small in area but going well and this party was instructed to return and join the Willow Spring gang to fight the fire.

TALBOT was instructed to contact me on radio when he arrived at the fire.

This report was received at about 4 pm when he reported that he had arrived on a road adjacent to the fire and would move in shortly. I instructed him to move in and to surround the fire.

This area was a portion of Easter Block which had been control burn't some five weeks previously. The purpose of the control burn is to remove the under growth without burning the crowns of the trees, in areas which have a mixture of Jarrah and Karri it sometimes happens that the moister Karri gullies are not burn't effectively and this would give an irregular burning pattern in this block. I believed this happened in this block and that the surround with TALBOT'S men was quite possible.

According to my records it appeared that all edges had been burn't in for approximately half a mile, I doubted this however on the south - east corner where two karri creeks were shown on the plan coming to the road.

The forecast for the following day was fine and hot with moderate to fresh north-east winds veering south-east to south during the day. The Hazard was high. Received 4.15 pm. 1st.

At 7 pm on the 1st TALBOT rang through from Dickson Tower and reported that the country was very thick and that he

would require additional men and a bulldozer to complete the surround. He reported that some of the men had brought their tea, this was his responsibility and there was little I could do about it until morning, however I suggested that if he could contact Barlee Settlement they could probably satisfy his requirements.

It has been suggested that I treated his request for food with improper respect, this is not so.

In regard to his suggestion for bulldozer assistance I considered the matter in the light of the anticipated wind directions for the following day and the relatively safe north and west boundaries. (North-east, south-east and south later in the day.) I therefore advised him that we would arrange for additional men to help him with his surround at daybreak the following morning. To effect this I instructed him to dismiss his two Barlee Brook men immediately with instructions to return with the full Barlee gang at day break. This I believe he did and the Barlee gang reported to him at 2 am the next morning.

At 7.45 am the following morning I advised Manjimup that we had a fire near their boundary and to hold their Glenoran gang in case it was required.

At 8.15 am TALBOT advised from Dickson Tower that the fire had not been surrounded and Forester PEARS left to investigate the position.

During the morning the Tower reported that the fire was moving southward with no easterly movement at all. This was received at intermittent reports.

The wind reports from Towers indicated that the wind was in the north-east until about 10 am, this was as anticipated. However at 11 am. both Towers reported north-west winds, this was entirely different to the forecast for that day which was received at 8.15 am., and confirmed, that the movement of the wind was from north-east to south-east with a later sea breeze.

At 11.20 Forester PEARS realising this rang Dickson Tower and advised that he would require the bulldozer and the Glenoran gang on the southern flank. Glenoran gang left at 11.30 and the Manjimup D-4 and Low Loader left Manjimup at approximately 1.30 pm. At 1.0'clock. Forester PEARS rang from Dickson Tower and advised that the Glenoran gang had arrived at 12 noon and that all gangs were preparing breaks on the south and east prior to back burning.

At 2.0'clock the Towers reported that the wind was gale force from the north west with westerly gusts and that fire were lighting up in the south east corner up to a mile ahead of the main fire.

It was evident from this that the firefighting had been taken completely by surprise by this sudden gale force wind and Manjimup were advised to alert Yanmah gang.

At 3.35 pm. Forester PEARS advised from Dickson Tower that the fire was out of control in Iffley Block heading towards Dawson City Well. He advised that he would require two gangs from Nannup for burning that night, he also advised that four men from the Willow Spring gang had not been sighted since the breakthrough.

The two Nannup gangs (working around Nannup at the time) were contacted and instructed to leave at 6.30 pm.

At 5 pm. Assistant Forester CRAWBORD who was in charge of

(3)

that section of the fire in the Manjimup Division advised at 5. O'clock that the fire was still out of control and that the Yanmah gang were moving in, and Manjimup Head - Quarters were advised from this office that the TD9 Bulldozer was fueled and ready for transport to the fire whenever their Low Loader was available to pick it up.

Forester PEARS report from the Dickson Tower at 6.45 pm. stated that the Glenoran/gang and dozer were tying in the fire on the south west side of Coronation road. He advised that two gangs would work on the south of the fire and would light up along New Chum's road, Iffley road and north along Coronation road to hopover.

Two gangs would light up along Hopkins road, Eastwind road, Jubilee road and south to the hopover. Seven of the Willow Spring gang were working on the head of the fire and three of them on-the had turned up and four were still missing.

In a fire of this nature it is not uncommon to have men split up and missing for sometime and it was presumed that something like this would happen.

A report was received sometime later, few hours, that the rakes belonging to the missing men had been found and a search for the men had begun. Report received from Forester PEARS.

The next day on January the third at 7.45 am TALBOT advised that the men had not been found and he suggested it was time for police action and an organised search be made.

Immediately I contacted Constable Johnson of Nannup police and pointed out the serious nature of the position.

I then organised a party from Headquarters men and Constable Johnson proceeded to the Mill to arrange a team of mill workers for the search.

At 8.25 am Forester PEARS advised that the fire was under control and being patrolled.

At 9.30 am Forester PEARS advised that the bodies of the four men had been found.

Constable Johnson was immediately advised and proceeded to recover the bodies.

I expected someone to be at Dickson Tower to direct Constable Johnson.

I have read this statement and it is true to the best of my knowledge.

Nannup Station
5. 1. 1958.

Signed I.G.Morison.

Witness

.....Const. 2263.

States.

I am the District Forester employed by the Forestry Department at Nannup.

I am 57 years of age and reside with my family in Brockman Street Nannup.

I have been employed by the Forests Department for 27 years, the whole time in the Southern Region of the State.

As District Forester I give instructions to the Assistant Forester Talbot at Willow Spring and Forest Guard Tame of Nannup.

Sometime fairly early in November of 1957 I issued instructions to the Assistant Forester Talbot to advance burn a block of land known as Easter Block which is situated about 18 miles from Nannup

This was done during November and early December when weather permitted.

After advance burning is completed mopping up operations then commence which includes putting the fire out with water, sand and throwing small pieces in onto burnt country.

Mopping up on this block was completed by the Overseer of Barlee Brook gang on 5/12/1957.

The Overseer of Barlee Brook gang then reported to me that as far as he knew the fire was out and safe.

This gang then went to other jobs.

At about 8 pm on 1/1/1958 I received information that there was a fire on Easter Block at Barlee Brook.

I then went to the office and seen the plotted fire and read the estimated fire hazard in the log book for the following day; which was Severe to Dangerous, I also read in the log book that the Willow Spring gang was in attendance in charge of Assistant Forester Talbot.

after

Shortly after 8 pm/I had received news of the fire I again received information from Forest Guard Tame by Telephone that the fire was petering out.

I was off duty on 1/1/1958 and at 7/40 am on 2/1/1958, I went to the Office in Nannup to see if I could render any assistance to Mr Ian Morison Assistant Divisional Forest Officer. who was on duty that day.

After a discussion with Mr. Morison about the fire we decided that an account of the fire hazard and the winds being in the north-east that it could be a dangerous fire if not got under control and I decided that I would go out and render assistance.

I arrived in the vicinity of the fire about 9 am.

I immediately drove around the souther and eastern portion of the block and saw certain weaknesses that

I then communicated with Mr Morison in Nannup and asked for the assistance of more men and a bulldozer. (2)

He immediately arranged for the Glenoran gang of Forestry Workers to come to the fire and arranged for the bulldozer to come from Manjimup.

I went back to see Talbot who was in charge of the two gangs from Willow Spring and Barlee Brook, and I met him on the road.

We then established a base at the junction of Easter and Dickson Roads.

We then cleared the track into Blackwater Well so that we would obtain water from it for fire fighting purposes.

Overseers Gale and Rising were instructed to prepare breaks about 5 chains off the Easter Road and 5 chains off Dickson Road which run parallel about 5 chains from these roads.

The time then was about 12 midday.

The Glenoran gang arrived about this time.

The fire at this juncture was still coming south between reference tree GX 51/1 and GX 51/2.

The fire about this time appeared to be about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from Dickson Road.

The Willow Spring gang were employed then from Blackwater Well gang in a northerly direction for about 35 chains.

This gang consisting of Valentine, McCorkill, Hilliger and Butler were raking a break with Johnston and Barrett and Overseer Rising were lighting behind them after they had raked the break.

began ? The time now would have been about 2 pm and the Willow Spring gang ~~an~~ lighting against the wind.

The fire now appeared to have been burning towards Dickson Road and I left Mr Talbot in charge of the two gangs and went back to the Glenoran gang to assist them as I thought that may be the worst part of the fire at that time.

I was away from the Willow Spring gang for about 20 minutes whilst I was with the Glenoran gang on Dickson Road.

I was on my way back when I was informed by two of the Glenoran gang that the fire had broken away over the road.

I located Talbot at the base and he informed me that the fire had jumped the road from Easter Block and across Dickson Road.

It was impossible to get up the road where the Willow Spring gang had been working and I decided to notify Mr Morison in Nannup that the fire had got out of hand. This I did from the base.

(2) (3)

By this time the fire had got right out of control and had travelled about 3 miles in about 10 minutes.

At about 4 pm Mr Talbot informed me that some of the Willow Spring gang were missing and Mr Rising the Overseer had gone around the Easter Block and could not locate any of the missing men.

A short search was made between 7 pm and 8 pm for these men in the vicinity of where they were last seen, and their rakes were found nearby. It was then too dark to make any further search.

At about 10 pm the same night I went back to Dickson Tower and informed Mr Morison at Nannup of the position of the fire and that four of the Willow Spring gang had not been found.

I organised a search with the Willow Spring gang and at 6 am the following morning and about 8/30 am I met Mr Talbot and he informed me that he had found the bodies of the four men about 20 chains from where they were last seen the previous day.

I am of the belief that this fire was commenced by the advance burn in this area made in November 1957 and it is quite probable that tree trunk of a standing tree may have been smouldering since that time and eventually burn't along the ground until it came to some unburn't fuel and ignited.

This is not unusual from advanced burns as our records show at Nannup.

Signed ..O.Pears...

Witness of Signature D/S 1848.

W

(1)

John Arnold TALBOT States:-

I am a married man and reside at the Forestry Settlement, Willow Spring, via Nannup.

I am aged 57 years.

I am an assistant Forester employed by the Forests Department at Willow Springs.

I have been employed by the Forests Department for 12 years and have been stationed in the south-west all that time.

I have been at Willow Spring about 13 months.

I am well experienced in bush fire fighting and the bush generally.

I have been men under my control at Willow Spring and these included Jan HILLIGER, Robert Henry JOHNSTON, John Francis WILTSHIRE-BUTLER and George Henry McCORKILL.

On the 1st of January, 58 I was on service holiday but had been requested to stand by.

At 2.46pm I received a telephone call on the Forestry Phone from Mr. Ian MORRISON, Assistant Divisional Forest Officer of Nannup.

I was advised that there was a fire on the Easter block at Barlee Brook and instructed to proceed to the scene with all available men in my charge. I was also instructed to take two vehicles, a heavy duty truck with water tank and pump and the gang truck which carries the men and the fire fighting equipment.

I proceeded to the scene as soon as possible and arrived at Easter block about 4pm.

I was met there by two men from Barlee Brook fire gang who were there to show us the way to the fire.

The scene of the fire was approximately 17 to 18 miles south-west of Nannup, as the crow flies. We were about six miles east of the Pemberton road and the fire covered an area of approximately 150 acres.

*is unlikely
the stage?
c. to tower
rings.*
There was a north-west wind blowing at the time and the weather was warm.

Along the northern side of Easter block a 1957 Spring burn had been made and went in from the road approximately 30 to 40 chains.

I walked into where the fire was burning with my gang and the

7.0 pm On arrival we proceeded to put out the fire, and I went to the Dickson Tower and contacted Mr. MORRISON and requested further assistance.

I worked on the fire with my men until mid night and went back to the road for a cup of tea and something to eat.

I decided to spell my men for a while and at about 2 a.m. the Barlee Brook gang arrived and they consisted of about six to eight men.

I decided then to wait until the break of day to fight the fire again. Owing to the thickness of the scrub, swamp country, we couldn't continue to fight the fire through the night and do a good job.

We attacked the fire again about 4 a.m. with both gangs working. I investigated the edge of the fire and found that I would require more men to get it under control.

I went to Dickson Tower at about 8 a.m. and contacted Mr. MORRISON again and told him that the fire was too big for the Barlee Brook gang to handle and I wanted more help.

MORRISON told me to leave my men there and to return to Willow Spring for food for the men.

At Willow Spring I picked up the remainder of my gang, JOHNSTON and VALENTINE and returned with them and the food to the fire.

Mr. PEARS, District Forester of Nannup was there and he told me that there was more help coming.

PEARS and I went around the outside of the fire which by this time was starting to pick up again with a north-east wind.

We decided to use all our men to burn in to the fire from the road.

Between 12 and 2 pm gangs of men came from Glenoran and a bulldozer came from Manjimup.

The Barlee gang and my gang proceeded to take the break from the South-east corner of Easter block, my gang worked north and the Barlee gang, west.

They raked between about 12 noon and 2 pm. After raking we intended to burn in towards the fire but suddenly the wind changed to the north-west challenged fiercely towards the break we were working on.

The fire was just a roar in the distance and VALENTINE said to me "Its no use lighting, its lighting itself" He proceeded to light just the same but had to leave the area within a couple of minutes and run for safety.

(3)

At that time I don't know exactly where JOHNSTON, WILTSHIRE-BUTLER, McCORKILL, HILLIGER and BARRETT were but they were known to be working north of the corner and a few hundred yards up.

The fire burnt fiercely when the wind changed and fires were started by this main fire hundreds of yards ahead, travelling mainly from tree to tree.

This occurred somewhere around 2 pm and I didn't see BARRETT and VALENTINE until about five o'clock.

I waited at the corner for a while as everything was out of control. I asked RISING my O'seer to go around the northern part of the fire and see if he could locate the men.

I took a man with me and went to the southern side of the head of the fire and as it was near the road I returned nearly to the corner and found that area was engulfed in fire too so I went south and picked up another track which took me west of the fire.

I met PEARS there and went with him to the northern side and whilst going around met RISING coming back and he informed me that he hadn't seen anything of the men.

When I returned to another base at the western side of the fire I met VALENTINE and BARRETT who had just returned.

They told of the trouble they had in getting out and thought that WILTSHIRE-BUTLER, JOHNSON, HILLIGER and McCORKILL might not have made it.

PEARS was to notify Nannup then and I went with my gang in search of the missing men, I searched until dark without success, and met PEARS and told him I'd like help for a search but he advised to wait until the morning as the men might turn up.

PEARS told me to take my gang to the northern part of the fire and try to check it.

I took my gang, at least the remainder of the gang, and the Nannup gang.

VALENTINE, BARRETT and myself searched a number of the roads through the night for the missing men in case they came through.

I went to the Dickson Tower at about 7.45 a.m. and rang Mr. MORISON and told him I considered the matter serious and that I wanted the police advised. At daylight I had sent my men in search and whilst I was at the tower four men arrived from Nannup and I took them with me and furthered the search.

At about 8.30 a.m. I walked onto the bodies of the four missing men in a gully near a red gum tree.

They were about 20 chains east of the Easter road and about the same distance from the Dickson road.

I was able to identify the bodies although they were badly burn't. All clothing etc. was burn't away from their bodies.

I went back to the road and met PEARS who had just come from the Tower and gave him the bad news.

I waited then until the arrival of the police.

I have read this statement and it is true to the best of my knowledge.

Nannup Station.
3. 1. 1958.

Signed

WitnessConst 2263.

William Arthur George RISING

States:-

I am an married man and reside at Willow Spring via Nannup.

I am aged 30 years and am employed by the Forests Department Willow Springs. I am an Overseer.

I was employed by the Forests Department on the 28.2.1950.

I worked in Pemberton until the 4.1.1955 when I was transferred to Tone River and worked there until 3.8.1956. I have been in Willow Springs ever since.

I was born in the country and know the bush well.

I've had a lot of experience in bush fire fighting.

At about two forty in the afternoon of the 1.1.1958 Mr. John TALBOT (Jnr) came down and advised me that his father had been notified from Nannup that the Willows gang was to attend a fire at Easter block, Barlee Brook.

We left Willows settlement at approximately five minutes to 3 O'clock with Mr. TALBOT, Asst. Forest Officer, in charge.

The gang consisted of eight men and arrived at the scene at about 4.45pm.

We proceeded to the fire in a southerly direction from Hopkins road and carried rakes and slashes with us. The fire was about half a mile in and the fire was burning moderately. It was burning over a long front.

At about 8pm Mr. Talbot went to Dickson Tower to contact Mr. MORISON, Assistant Divisional Forest Officer to suggest that he burn back from Easter road and to request food.

TALBOT was met by me about 30 minutes later and informed me that the fire had to be stopped where it was and that rations would not be provided and that "we would have to starve". He said that he had been speaking to MORISON.

At that stage we returned to the fire and continued fighting until 1 am when we returned to Hopkins road for a spell. The fire was burning quietly at that time.

We returned to the fire somewhere between 4.30 am and 5 am.

We continued fighting it until approximately nine thirty when we had a spell and made tea.

Mr. TALBOT had left a message to say that he was going to Willow Spring for food, and returned at about 10.45am.

JAN 1958

We had a feed and moved up to the junction of Easter Road and Dickson road. Mr PEARS met me about 12.15pm and I was instructed to rake an old five chain break running parallel with Eater road. (2)

The whole Willow Spring gang worked on that and it included JOHNSTON, WILLISHER- BUTLER, McCORKILL and HILLIGER.

At about 2.20pm the fire started to roar tremendously and was between half and three quarters of a mile away from us.

At this stage I returned to my truck for water bags and I was instructed by Forester PEARS to obtain one or two men and to clear a track into a water hole named Black water well which was situated in from the two roads mentioned by approximately five to six chains.

I went back to my main gang and got Ray THOMAS and he and myself proceeded to clear this track into the well. I took THOMAS with me and we walked back towards the well and met TALBOT and Jimmy VALENTINE. Jack TALBOT then instructed myself and VALENTINE to light back along the track we were raking, thats the track I was working on with the main gang and also told Ray THOMAS to go and contact Jin McCRONE to bring heavy duty, that is a truck with a water tank up to where we were lighting.

VALENTINE and I started to light up. VALENTINE proceeded ahead of me and his fire was burning that well that I didn't consider it necessary to follow him along.

I returned to where we started lighting to patrol the fire and McCRONE and THOMAS returned to go for Heavy duty,

At that time the fire absolutely went crazy and rushed through the tree tops hundreds of yards, or probably up to three quarters of a mile ahead of the main fire.

At this time TALBOT and myself went out onto HOPKINS road and returned to Dickson road and there was fire ranging everywhere then.

We were heading away from the fire as we could easily have been involved in it ourselves. We thought that the other men who were in the danger area may have got away to the north..

McCRONE and myself proceeded up Dickson road onto Sands road and then onto Hopkins road and down Easter road to a point about four hundred yards from Easter Brook on Easter road. Only a few hundred yards from the roaring fire and we called and shouted for the other men but got nor response.

When I first left Easter road when the fire was raging in company with TALBOT the other men were about 15 chains up the road more or less in the seat of the fire. I had no transport on the spot it would have been suicide for me to attempt to help them which I couldn't have done if I had reached them.

We returned to Dickson Road and met up with TALBOT and PEARS at about 5.45pm.

By this time BARRETT and VALENTINE had returned and JOHNSTON, WILLISHER-BUTLER, and McCORKILL and HILLIGER were missing.

VALENTINE and BARRETT thought that the men had been caught in the fire and feared the worst. We advised PEARS that they were missing and on our own initiative we proceeded to where they were last working and we made a search and were unable to find the men and then we reported to PEARS again and were instructed to proceed with fire operations.

We carried on until daylight the next morning and at about 8.30 am the missing men were found dead by Mr TALBOT.

From the time I left WILLOW SPRING on the 1st and until I returned to base on the 3rd in the afternoon, I had had approximately two hours sleep and I could almost safely say that for the rest of the gang which included, TALBOT, (57 yrs) TALBOT (jnr) 17 yrs, McCORKILL (64 yrs) WILLISHER-BUELER (37 yrs) McCORNE (30 yrs) THOMAS (22 yrs) HILLIGER (37 yrs) BARRETT (25 yrs). JOHNSON and VALENTINE never came out until the Thursday morning.

*is that
the
information?
origin?*

Until Thursday the 2nd at about 12/15pm the fire was fought by our gang and six others from Barlee Brook and the fire covered miles of country.

At this time five men arrived from Glenoran and no more arrived until about 5 to 6pm that evening.

I have read this statement and it is true to the best of my knowledge.

Nannup Station.
4.1.58.

Signed

Witness _____ Const. 2263

W

①

John Francis GALE,

States,

I am an Overseer of the Forrestry Department and am employed at Barlee Brook, 18 miles from Nannup.

I am married, 34 years of age and reside with my wife and family at Barlee Brook.

I am in charge of 5 other men employed by the Forrestry Department in that area.

On several occasions during November of 1957 I and my gang had occasion to Advance burn some land known as Easter Block which is owned by the Forrestry Department at Barlee Brook.

Advance burning is known as burning prior to Milling operations and it consists of the following, Firstly a break is burnt around the outside of the block if possible. Then it is stripped through in one to three chain strips right through the block.

Any unburnt pockets are then mopped up in suitable weather.

On 5.12.1957 I had occasion to mop up, which consists of throwing in of any lighted small pieces of timber etc into burnt country. This was carried out at Easter Block.

It is quite possible for these burns to keep burning for some months afterwards in treetrunks and trees and it the mopping up that cleans up all these lighted pieces as a rule.

I can say that the Fire at Easter Block which commenced on 1.1.1958 was a result of this burn and I have little doubt that this is correct because this block is situated at a spot where only Forrestry Workers normally visit.

I have been employed by the Forrestry Department for a total of about 5 years and it has been my experience to mop up these type of fires weeks after the first burn.

Any further outbreaks of fires after the initial burn are usually caused by sparks from treetrucks that are stillm burning and have not been noticed.

4.1.58

.....

SignedD/s 1848.

Kevin Joseph BARRETT,

States,

I am a married man and reside with my wife at Willow Springs which is 14 miles from Nannup.

I am a 25 years of age.

I am employed by the Forestry Department at Willow Springs as a Forestry Worker.

I have been employed by the Forestry Department for about 8 years.

I have been employed at Willow Springs since October 1957.

I remember the 1.1.1958, I received a message from Mr. John Talbot who is the Assistant Forester at Willow Springs to the effect that there was a fire in the Barlee Brook Area, and I had to attend.

Barlee Brook is approximately 20 miles from Willow Springs.

We arrived at Barlee Brook at approximately 5 pm at the fire.

There were 8 men present at the fire including Jan HILLIGER - Robert Henry JOHNSTON and John Francis WILTSHIRE-BUTLER and George Henry McCORKILL.

The fire we attended was in Easter Block at the Barlee Brook area.

There were two men there from the Barlee Brook gang, in Wally Ogilvie and another man I know as William.

These men stayed with us and altogether there were 10 of us there to fight the fire.

The frontage of the fire consisted of about 2 miles and we attacked it from the west side moving east along the northern side.

At that point the wind was blowing from the West.

We fought the fire until about 1 am on 2.1.1958 and then retreated back to our rendezvous and in the meantime Mr. John Talbot had gone to Dickson Tower to communicate with Nannup Forestry Office, to ask further assistance.

When Mr. Talbot returned he advised us all that Mr. Morison had refused us further assistance, until 6 am next day.

At approximately 4am on 2.1.1958 we again attacked the fire this time there were four extra men from the Barlee Brook gang.

The Willow Springs gang attacked the fire on the same side as we had previously.

The Barlee Brook gang attacked the fire on the Southern Side of the fire.

We worked against the fire until about 9/15 am the same day and then we returned to our rendezvous and found that Mr. Talbot had gone to Willow Springs for food, he returned at about 11 am.

*disagrees with
Johnston's statement
as Johnston came
at the next morning*

*this stage fire
by 50 to 100 acres
a long
agreed perimeter*

*correct Barlee
my sent out to
nannup at 4am*

slm side

Contradictory

We had a snack and we then proceeded to Easter Road which is further east of where we were fighting the fire before and started to rake and slash a five chains break. (2)

We worked along this break for approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ mile and the fire was gradually moving up on us all the time.

The next thing that happened Raymond Thomas came up to us and told a Mr. Jim McCrone that he was wanted back at the heavy duty (This is a pumping unit on a truck,) and he also informed us that there were hop overs (This is sparks, bark etc. jumping from the main fire into unburn't areas).

There was Butler, Johnston and Hilliger and myself went back to stem the hopovers, but the fire from the hopovers were too intense to stem.

I went back to ^{inform} Bill Rising of the position regarding the hopovers but I was cut off and couldn't get back, so I returned back to the other three and told them to get out.

They came out onto Easter Road to where I was and John Butler asked me where McCorkill was I told him I didn't know other then he was still, inside the fire with Jim Valentine.

Butler went in to find Mc Corkill but he returned and hadn't found him, in the meantime both McCorkill and Valentine had run out onto Easter Road.

The time now was about 2/30pm and the position regarding the fire was hopeless.

We then tried to work in a Northerly direction to get beyond the fire, the six of us were together at this time. We found that the fire had got out of control completely, and we were almost surrounded by the fire.

We all started running in a northerly direction on the Easter Road, Jim Valentine and I were together and the others were about 60 to 80 yards behind us on the road.

Just before we moved in an easterly direction into the bush the last person I saw was McCorkill who was opening dense scrub to get away, this is the last I saw of the men.

Jim Valentine and I kept running in this dense scrub for about 20 chains until we struck the creek which was also very dense.

Jim Valentine and I ran for about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles before we came upon Dickson Road which runs in and East - West Direction.

We then tried to contact the main party to see if McCorkill, Butler, Hilliger and Johnston had got away from the fire, but it was not until about 5/50pm that we found them after walking about 5 miles.

The others hadn't turned up and we became concerned, and I thought then that these men had been caught in the fire and there was little hope for them.

The last time I saw these four men was about 2/45pm and after I had located the main gang we all went back to where I had last seen them. The fire then had passed this point, and we could find no trace of the missing men.

At about 9 am the following morning we discovered the bodies about 400 yards from where I had last seen them. I was not present when the bodies were discovered.

2. likely 5 to 10 minutes of precious time not here!

reference to plan discussion with me after the fire incident about to 1 1/2 miles

States,

I am a Forrest Worker employed by the Forrestry Dept, Willow Spring, gang.

I am 35 years of age, married and live with my family at Willow Spring.

On 1.1.1958 I visited Fonty's Pool at Manjimup with my family, and returned to Willow Spring at about 9/30pm the same evening.

The same evening I Mrs Barrett informed me that there was afire in the Barlee Brook area.

At about 8 am the following morning 2.1.1958 Jack Talbot the Assistant Forester left word with his wife that he would be picking me and Bob Johnston up in about an hour and to have rations ready to take out to the gang.

I notified each of the wives of the men and Jack Talbot arrived at about 9 am and we left at about 9/30 am with the stores for the men of the Willow Spring gang.

We arrived at a spot about 10/45 am that morning and the men had breakfast there this was in the Barlee Brook area.

After the men had had breakfast we all went about another 5 mile to Easter Block where the fire was burning.

This point we made as our base camp.

While we were here Mr. Pears and Mr. Talbot arrived and we received instructions to slash and rake an old road on Easter Block in preparation to stem the fire by a back burn.

When we commenced this work the time would be about 11/15 am the same morning.

The Willow Spring Gang were on one track and the Barlee Brook Gang were on another track slashing and raking as we were doing.

The fire at this stage was travelling very fast from a North Westerly Direction and the time was about 1/30pm.

All of Willow Spring gang was working on this track. About this time I broke the handle of my slasher I went back to the base camp to get another slasher.

Bill Rising had gone before me to get a water bag.

When I arrived back at the truck for a slasher and a waterbag I met Mr. Pears and Jack Talbot. Mr. Pears told me to get a couple of fire sticks and a bottle of Kerosene, and to tell Bill Rising to tell Jim McCrone and Ray Thomas to come back and man their heavy duty trucks and for me and Bill Rising to start lighting along the fire break of what has been raked.

*about 12 noon
to For Pears.*

I went back to East Block where Bill Rising and I started to light the break that had been raked, the time was now about 2pm. (2)

We both were in the centre of the Break and Bill Rising went one way lighting the break and I went in the opposite direction towards Easter Brook lighting the break.

As I got halfway along my section there was a hopover (This is a fire lit in advance of the main fire by a spark) and I yelled out to Barrett, Hilliger, Johnston and Butler to control the hopover they were all only about 2 chains away from me at the time.

At this time Jack Butler came up to me and said "They are Bloody fools lighting this now, why didn't Morrison let Jack Burn back from the Easter Road last Night, " as old Snow (meaning McCorkill) suggested,"

I just said to Butler well I am not the Boss, I am doing as Oscar Pears told me to do.

I then proceeded on down past the hopover towards Snow McCorkill about 7 chains away, still lighting the fire on the break.

When I approached Snow McCorkill I stopped lighting about 2 chains away from the end of the break, I then put out the torch that I was using for lighting and was talking to Snow McCorkill saying how quickly the fire was burning.

It was just roaring at this time and was about 2pm or 2/30pm and was racing towards the break, and Old Snow said to me we're safe here Jim we are in burnt country.

I said, "Don't be bloody silly look how it is burning here where I have lit it in burnt country, and just at this time we heard a yell and we thought it was a hop-over.

Snow McCorkill and I made our way towards the sound and as we started to go fire was falling all around us, so Snow said, "Lets get to the road."

When we arrived at Easter Road we were surrounded by fire over top and coming in both sides and both ends together.

I made a run for Easter Brook, but when I got around the bend there was no escape, so I came back and said to Snow lets go through the creek.

He said No lets go this way and indicated towards Dickson Road area.

At this time Barrett was running up Easter Road towards me and yelling out "Lets get out of here" - Hilliger, Butler and Johnston were approximately 3 chains behind him running towards me, the fire was all around the lot of us at this time.

I could see a broken patch about 20 chains to a swamp that had not caught fire and I started running towards it and Barrett was following me and just as I went down the hill from the swamp, I saw Johnston-Hilliger and Butler arrive at where Snow McCorkill had stopped off

no suggestion was made to Morrison of such burning the various events in any case that I am running in is night would not burn.

is, up to then, would we have the way safety.

I never saw these men again.

(3)

I made the pace to the creek with Barrett still following, I went through the bulk of the Nettick tee tree and buggary bush swamp till I hit the creek bed, I then went underneath this along the creek bed for about 300 yards, this gave me the break on the fire.

We then left the creek bed and went through hazel and nettick country until we hit the ridge for about a mile the fire was still coming and dropping in front of us and both sides of us.

Eventually after running for about 2½ miles through the country Barrett and I escaped when we hit Dickson Road.

The time would be about 3 to 3/30pm.

When we were making back to the base at the Junction of Dickson and Easter Road, but we found that we could not get back as there was fire on both sides of the road.

We waited for about an hour on the road before we could get back to the base camp and I immediately put out the warning then that I did not think the other at least two meaning McCorkill and Hilliger would get out of the fire.

I gave Butler and Johnson a great chance to escape because they were younger than the others.

I told this to Bill Rising, Jack Talbot, Oscar Pears, Jim McCrone.

No person had seen anything of the men since I had seen them in the face of the fire at about 2pm or 2/30pm.

After I had told these men of what I thought had happened Oscar Pears said "Well it is up to the Overseer to look after the men," and with this Jack Talbot said "We must go and find them".

Jim McCrone, Bill Rising, Kevin Barrett, Jack Talbot and myself then went back to where I had last seen Hilliger Johnston and Butler.

The five of us made a wide sweep down over the swamp and back to Easter Road again and we found their rakes where they had ran away from the fire and left them.

By this time it was too dark and we could do no more.

During the night Barrett, Talbot and myself drove around the roads around Easter Block and nearby without finding any trace of the men.

The morning of 3.1.1958 I was about 100 yards away from Jack Talbot when the bodies of Hilliger, Johnston Butler and McCorkill were found all together by a red gum tree about 400 yards from where I had last seen them.

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE

EASTER BLOCK FIRE - JANUARY, 1958.

MARGINAL NOTES.

- (a) No gangs alerted.
- (b) No further reports on smoke from towers.
- (c) Approximately 1 hour delay in leaving Willow Spring.
- (d)
 - (i) Talbot should have been more insistent.
 - (ii) Glenoran should have been alerted at least. If W/S gang to work all night to be replaced by Barlee Brook at first light it was reasonable to suppose that two gangs would still be needed and someone would have to replace Willow Spring.
 - (iii) Manjimup should have been contacted re low-loader. The 7 ton truck for Nannup had been held up; this high lights the futility of having dozers without means of transport.
 - (iv) Morison was probably right in his stand and normally the question would not be of great consequence but in the light of later developments it assumed considerable importance.

What are the facts

There appears to be a long-standing dis-satisfaction over the question of parsimony with rations and this fire brought it to a head.

*Is this true?
No.*

The statement was made that the men who died were exhausted and hungry and that their physical condition contributed materially to their collapse.

- (e) The fire had practically died out and it is more than possible that if the men had had lights and there was a dozer working all night the fire would have been contained by dawn.
- (f) There were no tower reports prior to 0800.
- (g)
 - (i) No explanation was given as to why the offer of help by the visitors was rejected.
 - Morison's rejection of the idea to back fire from Easter road was probably sound.
 - (ii) Glenoran should have been thrown in, although by this time it was almost certainly too late.
- (h) This north wind at Dickson, following Talbots report at 0815 that the fire was burning strongly was the cue that the situation was dangerous, although Carlotta still gave the wind as N-E at B to C.

*was a reasonable
ice with forecast of
to SE, winds & after
breeze - a NE wind
in most of morning.*

It is very doubtful if this was a wise choice of base, being on unburnt or poorly burnt country and in front of the on coming fire.

It was certainly near two water points and on the site where they intended to work, but still dangerous.

- (1) (i) It should have been obvious by this time that there

was no hope of a south-west wind; the stand on Dickson and Easter roads was hopeless.

** Was a field phone available? //*

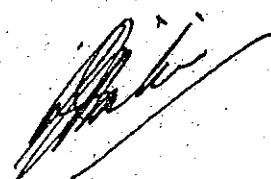
(ii) A telephone line runs along Dickson road, but no attempt was made to set up a field phone at base.

(m)

By this time it should have been obvious that the position was completely hopeless, the back fire, running freely down the slope against the wind indicating extreme turbulence and the imminence of a blow up.

Time between spot fires & a major breakthrough seemed only a matter of minutes.

The men could not cope with the spot fires and should have been withdrawn.



*ABW
10.1.58*

* Telephone line follows Newthum, Iffley & Coronation & Telephone Road, (NOT on Dickson Rd. ~~west~~ east of Newthum Road. A phone should have been placed at junction of Newthum & Coronation or Telephone & Coronation ~~as early on Fri 3rd, when snuffing up~~ on evening of 2nd or early on 3rd to facilitate communications.

a later check reveals that personnel from Manjimup installed a telephone at the junction of telephone road & Coronation road for rapid contact with Manjimup.

EASTER BLOCK FIRE - JANUARY 1958

1. An advance burn in Easter Block over the 2,200 acres, bounded by Sands road, Hopkins road, Easter road, and Dickson road, was commenced on Monday 2nd December 1957, and the last patrol of the area was carried out on Wednesday 4th.
2. This area was previously burnt in an uncontrolled fire in December 1950.
3. It was known that only a fringe burn was obtained, and it was hoped to patch out the area later, but a Departmental ban on burning was imposed, followed by a general ban imposed under Section 21 of the Bush Fires Act.
4. The burn was shown on the current burning plan as a deep fringe right round the area, see plan, but this was not correct; much of the perimeter, particularly along Dickson road, was hardly burnt at all, and most, if not all, Karri gullies coming out of the area were unburned.
5. This was known to Forester Pears, but apparently not to Mr. Morison.
6. No smokes were reported from the area until 11th December.
7. On 11th December at 1105 hours, towers reported a smoke, Dickson 62°, Carlotta 194½°, Glenoran 283°. These bearings place the fire on the south-west edge approximately 30 chains north of Dickson road. The smoke did not develop. Peak hazard at Pemberton Average Summer 6.6.
8. On 12th December at 1145 hours towers reported a smoke, Dickson 72°, Carlotta 194½°, Glenoran 282°, placing the fire about 18 chains south-west of the previous smoke.
The smoke did not develop. Peak hazard at Pemberton was High Summer 7.3.
9. On 26th December, 5 points of rain were recorded at Nannup, followed by 35 points on the 27th and a further 3 points on the 29th.

Wednesday January 1st, 1958.

10. 0745 forecast:- Fine and hot with moderate to fresh north-east to south-east winds, veering southerly during the day. Hazard High Summer, estimated maximum temperature for Pemberton 89°, estimated minimum relative humidity 35%.

The peak hazard at Pemberton reached High Summer, 7.1 with maximum temperature of 89° and minimum relative humidity 30%. 2 p.m. readings at Manjimup were 88°, 31% and estimated hazard of High Summer.

11. Duty Personnel.

Nannup: Mr. Morison in charge. No standby. Forester

*with 10.9°
for rain
burnt in 1957
and morning
after fire*

Barlee Brook: On standby Ogilvie. Youth Herrell on station. Overseer Gale and employee Herrell were in Perth. Remaining 3 men away from the settlement.

On Tuesday 31st December the daughter of employee was rushed to Princess Margaret Hospital with Septicemia, the parents were advised that her condition was serious and it would be advisable for them to come to her.

Herrell has no car, and Overseer Gale received permission to drive Herrell to Perth on condition that he returned to Barlee Brook that, Wednesday night.

Willow Springs: A/F. Talbot on duty. No standby. Overseer Rising and six men, Buttler, McCrone, Hilliger, Thomas, and Barrett, were on the station.

12. The Fire.

1000 hrs. Winds from Dickson N.E. at B.

1115 Small white smoke, Dickson 59°, Carlotta 190°, Glenoran 288½°, placing the fire in reference square GW51, approximately 42 chains almost due south of reference tree GW51/1.

1130 Barlee Brook standby, Ogilvie and youth instructed to
← (a) inspect the fire and report back as soon as possible.

1200 Log shows wind at Dickson as S-W, A to B, but this is possibly a misprint as the wind at Carlotta is given as N-W and the wind at Dickson at 1400 hours is given as N-W, A to B.
"a" in column probably column to right
(b) this direction

1400 Barlee Brook crew reports fire small in area, but going well. Wind at Dickson N-W, A to B.
(c) A/F. Talbot instructed to proceed with Willow Spring gang to fire immediately.
means nothing

1500 A/F. Talbot and gang left for the fire. Had considerable difficulty on the way owing to logs across roads.

1600 Talbot and gang reported having reached fire zone, not yet at fire. Instructed to move into fire, and surround it during the night. Wind at Dickson and fire area S-W, A to B.

1415 Talbot met up with Ogilvie at junction of Hopkins and Easter roads, went south along Easter road for approximately 40 chains and struck in west towards the fire.

The first ten chains were fair going in patchy burn, but then they struck very dense scrub, pulled out and went in from Hopkins road.

1600 At face of fire. Overseer and men started work on the east flank with a S-W wind, while Talbot went ahead on reconnaissance.

some salients, and they made some good progress, but the going was very heavy due to the dense scrub.

1900

Talbot reported that the job was a big one and he needed, more men, suggested Glenoran, and a dozer. Morison instructed them to carry on and try to surround the fire that night; there was no transport for the dozer and there was little likelihood of its being sent out that night.

The Barlee Brook gang would be available in the morning, and it was arranged that Ogilvie would return to Barlee Brook to guide them in.

Talbot advised that his gang needed rations; Morison took the stand that it was up to them to bring their own rations, and there was nothing he could do about it. (see note d(iv)).

Talbot returned to the gang and in the meantime Morison made enquiries in Nannup and found that no loader was available.

Talbot found they were making some headway in getting round the fire, but the going was very heavy.

Pears returned to Nannup, rang Tame, and was told there was one fire running in Easter Block, being attended to by Willow Spring gang, and that the last report was that it was dying down.

Pears checked the position on the plan and read the log; he was uneasy about the fire because he knew the country was dirty and the burn on the south was very light and patchy.

He noted that the forecast for next day was fine and hot with moderate to fresh north-east winds, backing south-west in the afternoon, hazard High. Summer estimated maximum temperature 91°, estimated minimum relative humidity 20%.

2200

At about 2200 hours Talbot's men had some food, and Ogilvie was sent back to Barlee Brook to guide the gang in, in the morning.

(e) The fire was dying down, and the men found it extremely difficult to find the fire face.

They began chasing odd spots of running fire that showed up, some of these might have been spot fires, or odd patches burning in dry fuel.

The edge was extremely uneven and it was found impossible to burn out salients.

2400

At about midnight the position became impossible and the gang was pulled out to rest until first light.

Thursday January 2nd, 1958.

200

Overseer Gale and Barlee Brook gang arrived at base on Hopkins road and bedded down.

Prob. sup. the size of the fire at this stage? 50 to 100 a/c

Should have taken own rations and himself at this time.

How many crabs were they instructed to take? 2150

What was Tame doing all day?

Talbot said short, as he and some others had plenty to spare

southwest and Willow Spring on the east face.

0600

Talbot and gang found that the fire was beginning to run and lift badly. The fire was probably lost already.

0745

Affect air mass from Manjimup
Forecast. Fine and hot with moderate to fresh north-east to south-east winds and an afternoon sea breeze. Hazard Severe approaching dangerous, estimated maximum temperature 97° estimated minimum relative humidity 20%. The peak hazard at Pemberton reached Severe Summer, 8.7 with maximum temperature of 98° and a minimum relative humidity of 57%.

The 2 p.m. readings at Manjimup were 98° and 21% RH, and the estimated peak hazard was Dangerous.

Pears was at the office for the forecast, was still uneasy about the fire and decided to go out to investigate.

0800

(f)

Tower bearings given as Dickson 59° to 67°, Carlotta 190°, Glenoran 287°. Winds at Dickson NE at C.

0815

*names of the accompanying
Fragley (g) fragment
showed good fragment
if he was afraid to
use inexperienced men*

Talbot reported that they had not been able to surround the fire and were badly in need of many more men, he suggested that there were some visitors at Willow Spring who would be prepared to help, but this suggestion was rejected by Morison, as was also the one that they begin burning back from Easter road.

Talbot was instructed to return to Willow Spring for rations and Forrest was asked to hold the Glenoran gang at Headquarters in case they were needed.

Talbot left a note for his overseer, giving him the hazard, advising him that he was returning to Willow Spring for rations and instructing him to continue down the east flank of the fire.

0900

(h)

Tower bearings, Dickson 71°, Carlotta 189°, Glenoran 285½°. Winds at Dickson, North at B to C

Pears arrived at Dickson road at about 0900, inspected the fuel bed in a gully he was afraid of, then went to Easter road to check the position on Easter Brook.

There he found an unburned section half a mile or so in extent, he then drove round to the tower to report.

1000

Towers bearings, Dickson 73°, Carlotta 189°, Glenoran 284½°. Winds at Dickson, North at B.

1045

Talbot returned to the gang on Hopkins road with rations and his two other men Valentine and Johnson and the men had a meal.

The fire was running freely and he had decided to back burn from Easter road, he then left, to contact Pears, going south along Easter road and told the gang to follow him after their meal.

1100

Winds at Dickson tower N-W at B to C.

1120

Pears reported to Nannup from Dickson tower, where he said the winds were NE tending slightly to the north.

He advised that the fire was burning very strongly and that he would need the Glenoran gang and a dozer along the southern flank which he considered was the most dangerous section.

(k)

He said he was going to meet Talbot and they would establish their base at the junction of Dickson and Easter roads.

Manjimup was advised accordingly and the Glenoran gang was to leave immediately and it was estimated that the Manjimup D4 would leave at 1200 hours.

Pears met Talbot about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of the tower they went to the base where Pears left his vehicle and continued on north up Easter road to meet the gangs.

They met the Barlee gang first and sent them on to base with instructions to clean up the break along Easter road. They then met the Willow Spring men and sent them back to base.

The fire was then burning strongly before a north to north-west wind and approaching the road between reference trees GX51/1 and GX52/2

1200

No reports on smoke in the log. Winds at Dickson N.W at B, Glenoran gang arrived at base and were taken one mile west to have lunch and then to start in cleaning the fire line between two unburnt sections.

300

Winds at Dickson North at B. Pears reported to Nannup that the three gangs, Barlee Brook, Willow Spring, and Glenoran, each with a H/D unit were then preparing to meet the fire on Dickson and Easter roads, hoping to back fire with a south-west wind.

(j)

Radio conditions were unsatisfactory and they had to reply on the telephone at the tower.

345

Manjimup D4 reported to have left Manjimup with N. Crawford to guide it in via Coronation and Dickson roads,

(m)

Pears instructed Overseer Rising to get a track cleared into Blackwater well which he proceeded to do with two men and then returned to the fire line to assist Valentine in back firing. He found that Valentine did not need any assistance as the back fire was running very freely down the gentle slope towards the main head fire which appeared to be somewhere about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile in from the road but was probably much nearer.

By this time the main fire was dropping burning embers among the men and starting spot fires both sides of Dickson road. Pears had noted that the fire was burning fiercely before a strong north-west wind which was chopping to the west.

100

Tower bearings Dickson 97° , Carlotta 184° and

(6)
The picture during the next half hour is very confused and timing is vague, it was during this period that the fire blew away.

About this time the Manjimup D4 arrived at the fire.

1415 Towers reported smoke on bearings Dickson 112⁰, Carlotta 182⁰, Glenoran 273⁰, presumably a hop over.

to Forrest was told to alert the Yanmah gang.

1430 Fire was now both sides of Easter road and Dickson road, Talbot and Rising had escaped through the head fire, westward towards Sands road and the other six men, cut off along Easter road had run south-eastwards from where they were trapped.

1440 Dickson tower reported a smoke on a bearing of 105⁰, distant about 2½ miles, presumably a hop over. There after there was too much smoke for the towers to function.

1500 All gangs were pulled out to regroup, at a new base at junction of New Chum and Dickson roads. Rising and McCrone went round Sands road, Hopkins road and down Easter road to the edge of the fire, in an endeavour to locate the six missing men, but without success.

The edge of the fire across Easter road was about 200 yards north of Easter Brook which was burning fiercely.

Talbot went down Iffley and Coronation road to try to locate the lost men, but met the head fire in Iffley Block opposite Telephone road and had to return.

After a recce, Pears decided to burn back along Jubilee and Eastwin roads during the night and arranged for the dozer and men to move around to Telephone road.

535 Pears reported the fire completely out of control in Iffley Block, heading towards Dawson City Well and that he would require two gangs from Nannup for night burning; these gangs were to leave at 1830 hours and meet him at Dickson tower.

He reported that the six men from Willow Spring gang were missing (note, the log reads 4 men)

515
*his had already
corrected between
5.2.30pm*

Forecast for Friday 3rd. Fine and hot with light to moderate north-west winds backing south-west in the afternoon, hazard Dangerous.

After the forecast Pears, Talbot and Rising got back to the original base at Dickson-Easter road junction but found it completely burned out. No sign of missing men.

700 Crawford reported that the Yanmah gang with Mc Alpine are ready to relieve Glenoran gang and Crawford Friday morning and he was advised that the Nannup TD9 was ready and awaiting transport when the low loader was available.

Talbot and Rising left in an attempt to search for the missing men along Dickson road, but found too many logs across the road and had to return.

1750

Two of the missing men, Valentine and Barrett arrived at the base, having walked some 4 miles along Dickson road. Valentine gave it as his opinion that there was no hope for the other four. (7)

1800

Pears and Talbot had made a reconnaissance of the perimeter of the fire and returned to base at 1800 hours.

The Willow Spring men wanted to have the loss of the four missing men reported and a search organised. Pears, who had been round the east side of the fire was afraid of losing more men and refused permission.

1830

All the Willow Spring men left to return to the spot where the four missing men last seen.

The two Nannup gangs left Nannup for the fire, and Carlotta towerman was instructed to return to the tower at 1900 hours.

1945

Pears reported to Nannup that two of the men had returned, but that four were still missing.

He advised that the Glenoran gang with dozer were detailed to tie the fire in on the south-east side of Coronation road, two gangs are to work on the south of the fire and to light up along New Chum road, Iffley road to Coronation road and north along Coronation road to the hop overs, between Herwood road and Telephone road.

Two gangs on the north side are to back fire along Hopkins road, Eastwin road and down Jubilee road to Coronation road and thence to the hop over.

He advised that the low loader should be in Nannup about 2300 hours to pick up the TD9 and H. Howes is to return to the fire as directed by Pears.

He arranged for the Jarrahwood gang to leave Nannup at 0500 on Saturday morning with Tame.

2000

Willow Spring gang returned from search to report they had found the rakes abandoned by the four missing men, but it was too dark to search further.

2015

1st Nannup gang left for the northern back burn.

2100

Willow Spring gang returned to junction of Hopkins and Easter road and commenced lighting along Eastwin road, lit about 15 chains but fire too hot so desisted.

2200

General back burning commenced.

The burning along Eastwin road jumped the road from south to north near the brook, Mazzinis gang tried to control the hop over, but the fire was too active and they had to withdraw.

They fell back to burn along the north boundary of Lewin Block, but by this time it would not burn. They then did a recce of the whole northern boundary and returned to the junction of Easter and Eastwin roads about 0200 on Friday morning.

Friday January 3rd 1958.

Willow Spring gang and Mazzinis gangs detailed

to light north along Coronation road to Davidson's road and north-west along Davidson's road.

0700

Jarraewood gang with A/F Tame met up with Willow Spring gang and took over their H.D. outfit. Willow Spring men declined to go home until missing men located and started searching for them.

0745

Forecast. Fine and warm with moderate to fresh south to south-west winds. Hazard High Summer, estimated maximum temperature 85°, estimated minimum relative humidity 40%. The peak hazard at Pemberton reached the top end of Moderate at 5.7, maximum temperature 76° and minimum relative humidity 73%.

The 2 p.m. reading at Manjimup were 79° and 39% and the estimated maximum hazard average summer.

Talbot advised Nannup that the men were still missing and asked what search arrangements had been made. Morison replied that he had heard nothing further about the matter and nothing had been arranged. Talbot said he considered the matter serious and wanted the police to bring out a search party and for a Minister of religion to be notified.

This was done.

0800

Vince and 3 of Palmers men arrived at the base. Talbot took these men to where the rakes had been found and they began searching.

0825

Pears reported that the fire was tied in and under control and it will depend on the efficiency of the patrol if it is to remain that way.

Pears to meet Police party at Dickson tower. Willow Spring settlement advised of the names of the missing men.

0830

Bodies found.

0845

Tame with gangs patrolling New Chum, Iffley and Coronation road as far as Henwood road.

0915

Morison advised Mr. Stewart in Head Office that 4 men missing.

0930

Pears advised Nannup of the finding of the bodies. Requested that the settlement be advised before the gang returns home. Morrison advised Milesi of finding of bodies.

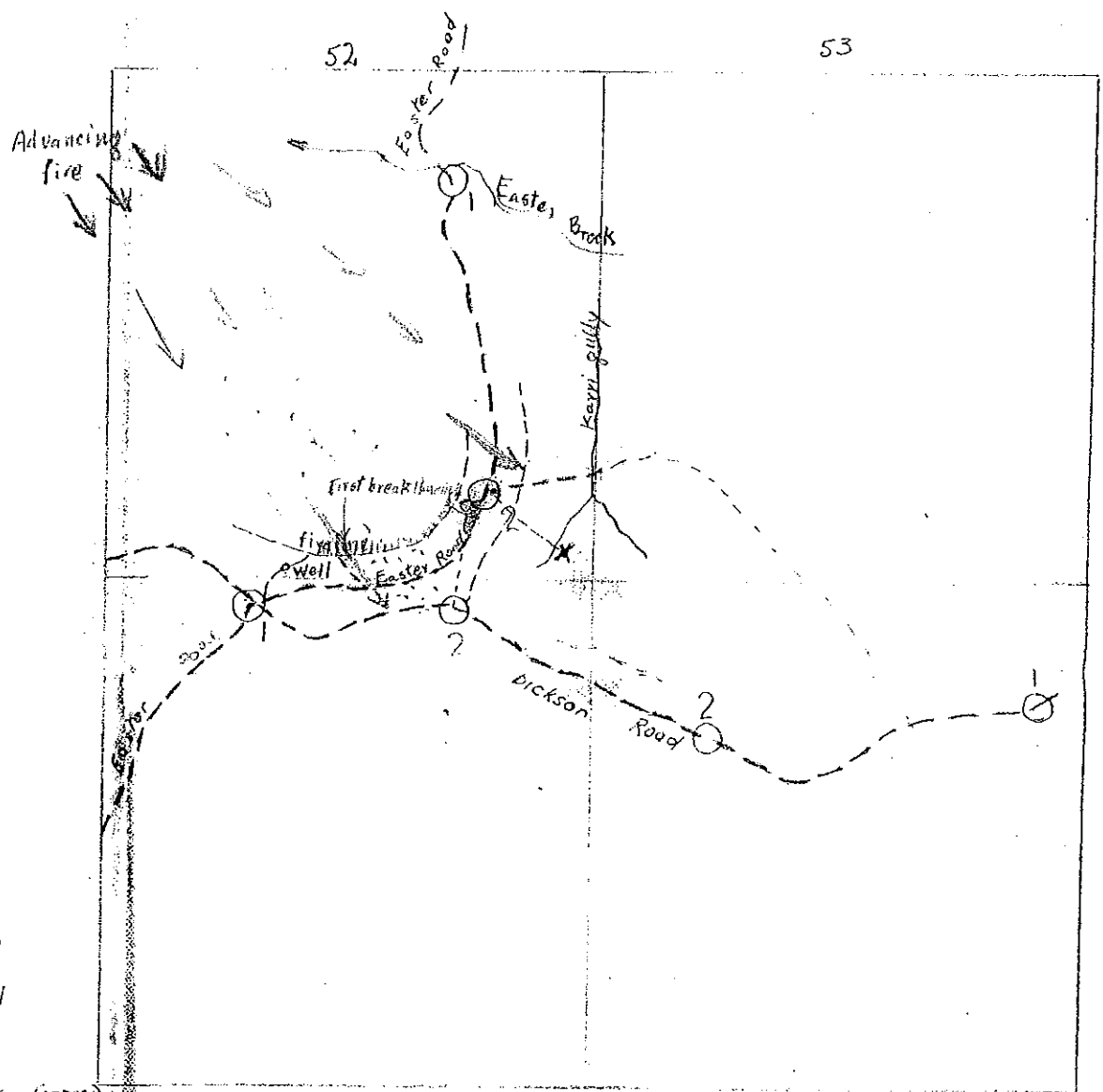
1100

Pears returned to Nannup.

1245

Willow Spring gang returned home.

PC
DETAILS EASTER BLOCK FIRE



LEGEND.

Where bodies were found

Where rakes were found

Previous burn

Course escapes took (approx)

Course taken by deceased (approx)

Backfire

Scale 20 chn = 1 inch

8-1-1958

R

Fire Deaths - Easter Block - Nannup Division.

Following a telephone message from Nannup about 9.30 a.m. on Friday the 3rd instant, advising that the bodies of four employees missing at a fire had been found, I proceeded to Nannup with Fire Control Superintendent Milesi to ascertain the facts of the tragedy

The relevant facts relating to the occurrence and suppression of the fire were gathered in the course of a "Fire Study" and this will be the subject of a separate report.

On the circumstances relating to the tragedy, I have to report as under, supporting the statement with the attached plan -

1. On Wednesday the 1st instant, a fire reported in Easter Block at a point approximately half-a-mile south of G.W.51/1 was attended by the Willow Spring gang that afternoon. The overseer and 7 men left with Assistant Forester Talbot at about 3 p.m. and reached the fire face some 30 chains south of Hopkins Road about 5 p.m.
2. They worked around the face until about 7.30 p.m. when they returned to the road for a break and some tea and food. After 8 p.m. they again returned and worked down the eastern face, and except for odd patches burning, the fire died out, the face could not be followed, and cut-off salients would not burn when attempts were made to light them.
3. At midnight A/F. Talbot and the gang withdrew and bedded down on the road to renew the attack at dawn with reinforcements which had been requested by Talbot at about 7 p.m. by telephone.
4. After a break of some $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours, work on the face recommenced at dawn, and the newly arrived Barlee gang worked around the west side of the fire with a view to joining forces around it on the southern side.
5. The forecast for Thursday 2nd at 4.15 p.m. on the 1st was "high summer". At 7.45 a.m. on the 2nd, the forecast had been amended to "severe approaching dangerous" and included the words "moderate to fresh northeast to southeast wind and afternoon sea breeze". It appeared that the Weather Bureau did not expect the trough of low pressure to pass inland that day with the dangerous weather and high northwest wind which usually accompanies such movement.
6. At 8.15 a.m., A/F. Talbot reported by 'phone to Nannup that his men failed to get round the fire and that with the current forecast, more men and equipment would be required. He was instructed to return to Willow Spring for food supplies for his men and was informed that further reinforcements would be sent out. After ring-stores ready, he left a note at the truck for his overseer, proceeded to Willow Spring for stores, and returned about 10.45 a.m. By this time the fire was quite active and the men had earlier withdrawn to the truck at the roadside.
7. Meanwhile following the 7.45 a.m. weather report and 8.15 report from Talbot, A.D.F.O. Morison set about arranging for further gangs, bulldozers, and power pumpers from Nannup, Glenoran (Manjimup Division) and Jarrahwod (Kirup Division).

District Forester Pears left Nannup immediately to inspect and make an appreciation of the whole position as he, more than any other officer, was familiar with the area concerned. (2)

The proximity of Dickson Tower also facilitated an inspection of the fire position and its activity.

He realised that although the southeastern quarter of the Block had been surrounded by a spring burn, most of the burning was in the western and northern portions with a very inadequate perimeter burn to the south and east.

Following a quick inspection along Easter Road and Dickson Road and a sketching of the inadequately burned sections, he returned to Dickson Tower, surveyed the fire and reported the position to Nannup.

He also advised Nannup that he would withdraw Talbot's men from Hopkins Road and make his base on Dickson Road at its junction with Easter Road.

The wind all the morning up to this time was a northeasterly with a tendency to swing north after 11 a.m.

8. After a meal at Hopkins Road, both the Willow Spring gang and Barlee gang were moved, as arranged, south to Dickson Road after filling up their water bags at Easter Brook. They arrived at the selected base about midday and almost immediately thereafter, a third gang arrived from Glenoran.

9. The plan of action at this stage with the wind prediction northeast to southeast and a later sea breeze (i.e. from the south-west) was to prepare firelines for burning, around Easter and Dickson Roads where the spring burning had failed, with a view to burning out the remainder of the Block late in the day if their hand was not forced at an earlier period. It appeared that the whole western half of the surrounded area was already well burnt and with the predicted winds, the position appeared to be fairly well in hand. The main concern of D/F. Pears was that with the northeasterly winds the fire might reach ~~Dickson~~ Road between Ref. Trees GX 51/2 and GX 51/1 before the sea breeze came in. He therefore disposed the fresh Glenoran gang on this sector to rake ready for back burning and placed the Willow Spring gang in the sector east of the water-hole and the junction of Easter and Dickson Roads. They also were instructed to rake the fireline parallel to and about 4 or 5 chns. north of and west of Easter Road.

10. Meanwhile although not obvious to the men on the ground, tower reports show that the wind had been veering from northeast to north and northwest, but it was not strong at this stage. When D/F. Pears realised that it appeared to be definitely in the northwest about 1.45 p.m., it was apparent to him that if it freshened, the fire would reach the sector held by the Willow Spring gang rather than that held by the Glenoran gang. He therefore instructed Overseer Rising to clear up the approach and access to the water-hole (where it was rather badly overgrown) so that it would be readily available for the filling of pumper units. Overseer Rising obtained one man from the gang some 200 yds. or more to the east and returned with him to carry out this work.

The heavy duty driver was sent back to his unit to bring it forward.

The fire now appeared to be approaching rapidly although still some distance away and D/F. Pears instructed that back-lighting should commence under the supervision of A/F. Talbot.

Meanwhile D/F. Pears went immediately to bring up the Glenoran gang and further pumper units.

From this point on, descriptions are somewhat confused as things moved with amazing speed. (3)

Six men of the Willow Spring gang appear to have been spread out over the raked fireline with Overseer Rising at the western end and McCorkill at the eastern extremity, ~~at~~ perhaps 300 or 400 yards away. Valentine started lighting with Overseer Rising following him closely. However, lighting was proceeding so readily that Rising decided a second lighter was unnecessary and therefore patrolled the sector as it was lit by Valentine. Lighting had been proceeding for a bare five minutes or so when Valentine noticed that fires were spotting up behind him on unburnt country and he called to some of his mates to come and deal with the "hop-overs". Two of them promptly dealt with the first one or two hop-overs until it was apparent that it was lighting in many places, and any further back burning was futile. K. Barrett therefore ran back to tell Overseer Rising, (as the whole area by now was covered in heavy smoke), only to find that he was cut off by flames across the track and could not get through to Rising. He returned to the men and they immediately decided to get out by crossing the 4 chn. strip to Easter Road. There was some loss of time here as Butler went back to get McCorkill and another man who were believed to be still on the fireline. However McCorkill and this other man had themselves retired to the road and after some shouting and confusion, all six men evidently got to the road.

The apparent escape route along the Easter Road running north was found to have been crossed by another tongue of fire and the men were thus cut off with fire both left and right of them.

Valentine and McCorkill disagreed on which direction they should strike into the scrub from this road, Valentine indicating it should be almost due east and McCorkill wished to go southeast. Whether or not he realised that this was the shortest distance to Dickson Road and an easterly escape is not known, but certainly McCorkill although aged, was the most experienced bushman in this group. The rest of the men were apparently some 100 yards or so further west. Meanwhile, Valentine from whom this description was obtained, struck out through the heavy scrub followed closely by K. Barrett. Although patches were lighting up around them they apparently made their way downhill through scrub of ti-tree and netic some 6 to 8' high, to a point below the junction of two small gullies which joined and flowed northwards to Easter Brook. Heavy green scrub under a canopy of karri gave them a slight respite in the creek bed before they burst through on the far side and made their way to the ridge top where the going was somewhat easier and the scrub of lesser height. They followed a course curving southwest along the ridge and came out on Dickson Road about a mile and a quarter east of Easter Road. Looking back before striking out ~~from~~ the track, the last they saw was McCorkill entering the scrub from the track with the other men running up the track towards him.

Apparently the party of four struck out in a course midway between that taken by Valentine and that in which McCorkill originally desired to go. They progressed about 18 chns. and crossed the head of the first creek before being overcome and collapsing in a small group around the butt of a large marri tree.

The remainder of the gang including the overseer and A/F. Talbot withdrew up ~~Dickson~~ Road to the west. Two of them, i.e. Talbot and Rising had to make their way through a short section of a few yards where fire was burning both sides of the road, but beyond that the road was clear to the west. They thought at the time that the rest of the men would be able to withdraw northwards along Easter Road, not being aware that another tongue of fire had cut off this escape route.

The time of this extreme fire activity and break through

About 3 p.m. A/F. Talbot sent Rising around the fire by Sands Road, Hopkins Road and Easter Road to seek the rest of the gang. They travelled south down Easter Road almost as far as Easter Brook, where the fire was raging across the road on both sides of the Brook, but shouts failed to locate the missing men.

At 4.15 p.m. they received by radio on Hopkins Road, the forecast for the following day before returning to the newly established base near the junction of Sands and Dickson Roads.

Meanwhile, about 3 p.m., A/F. Talbot went southwest along Easter Road, southeastwards along Iffley Road and northeasterly along Coronation Road with the object of travelling westwards along Dickson Road in a search for the missing men. However, he found the head-fire was burning close to Coronation Road (i.e. more than two miles ahead of the break-through point) and he proceeded no further north as he feared he would be cut off if he did so. He then returned to the new base, where the men were assembled and resting.

At 5.50 p.m. the main group was joined by two of the missing men, i.e. Valentine and Barrett. It appears that after breaking out ahead of the fire they had circled back to Dickson Road in a southerly direction and then walked eastwards to its junction with Coronation Road.

After the heat of the main fire had passed, Overseer Rising drove along Dickson Road in an easterly direction to a point about 1½ miles east of Easter Road through the fire blackened area, but seeing no sign of the men and encountering a lot of burning debris on the road, he returned to base. He had just missed the two men, who were then returning on foot in a westerly direction and actually walked about 4½ miles to rejoin the main group near the Sands Road junction. These two men feared the worst, i.e. that their mates had been caught in the fire although it was felt by others that they probably had escaped but had wandered out in some other direction through the bush.

After 6.30 p.m. A/F. Talbot and the Willow Spring men returned to Easter Road to search for the four missing men. They eventually found where the men had abandoned their four rakes about ½ chain in from the road but it was then too dark to proceed any further and they returned to the base at the junction of Sands and Easter Roads about 3 p.m.

11. During the night no organised search was deemed possible as D/F. Pears considered the risk of losing other men in the darkness was too great and his whole attention was then concentrated on the strategy and tactics to contain the fire by burning from existing roads during the night while conditions were mild. In the course of this work, A/F. Talbot penetrated a number of roads such as Eastwin Road and Jubilee Road in the hopes of picking up footprints of the missing men and he examined areas of soft soil or sand wherever they appeared on sections of these roads, but with negative results.

By dawn the Willow Spring gang had been out for one day and two nights and were relieved at 7 a.m. by a Jarrahwood gang. However the men did not wish to return until their missing mates were located.

A/F. Talbot returned to the tower and advised Nannup by phone at 7.45 a.m. that the position was serious and the Police and a minister should be informed that the men were missing. By this time he was convinced they would not be found alive. He asked that search parties be organised without delay. His four men had already gone to search for the missing men near the place where they were last seen.

Leaving the tower, A/F. Talbot took Forest Guard F.G. Vince and three more men to the spot where the rakes were found. Within

about half-an-hour he found the bodies of the missing men.

At 9.30 a.m. D/F. Pears reported by 'phone to Nannup that the bodies had been found and requested that arrangements be made to notify the settlement before the return of the men. A.D.F.O. Morison immediately notified the Police (Constable Johnson) who was then organising search parties from men at the sawmill of the Kauri Timber Co. The search arrangements were cancelled and Constable Johnson went out to the scene of the tragedy and arranged for the bodies to be removed to Nannup.

During the next three days of inquiry, close contact was maintained with the local police and the visiting Detective-Sergeant Sullivan. The scene of the tragedy was visited in company with A/F. Talbot and Messrs. Valentine and Barrett and a fairly clear picture of the events during the critical fire break-through was obtained. Copies of the statements given by the men are being made available by the Police and will be attached to this report when received.

DWR Stewart
REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT.

8/1/58.
DWRS/PS.

N.B. During the days 2nd and 3rd instant, radio communication conditions were very bad, and nearly all messages and reports were passed by telephone from Dickson Tower, involving some delay in travelling to and from the Tower.

*Copy sent to Det-Sergeant Sullivan of C.I.B., at his request,
& with Conservator's approval.*

SS
9/1/58

CONSERVATOR

Transp. 24 to above. 9/1/58

16.11.
9.1.58.

Mr. Wallace:

Black

Big Easter Brook

Approx southern limit of
five o'clock noon

Approx southern
limit of fire at approx

Approx. escape route of Valentina
3-barret.

found here

515

2. already

First break-through
about 2:30 pm.

Five Hrs.

online

Memorandum Dickson Road

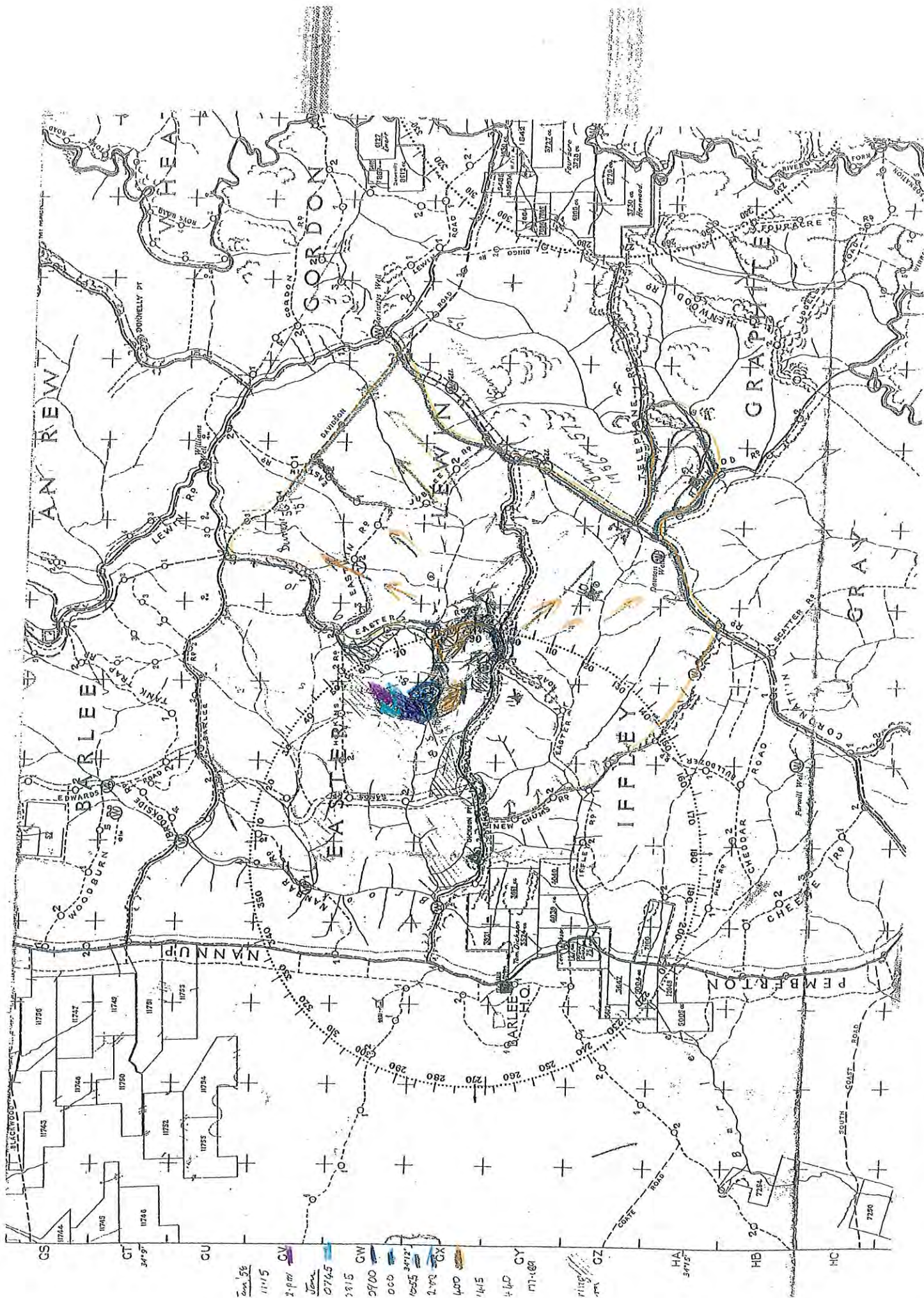
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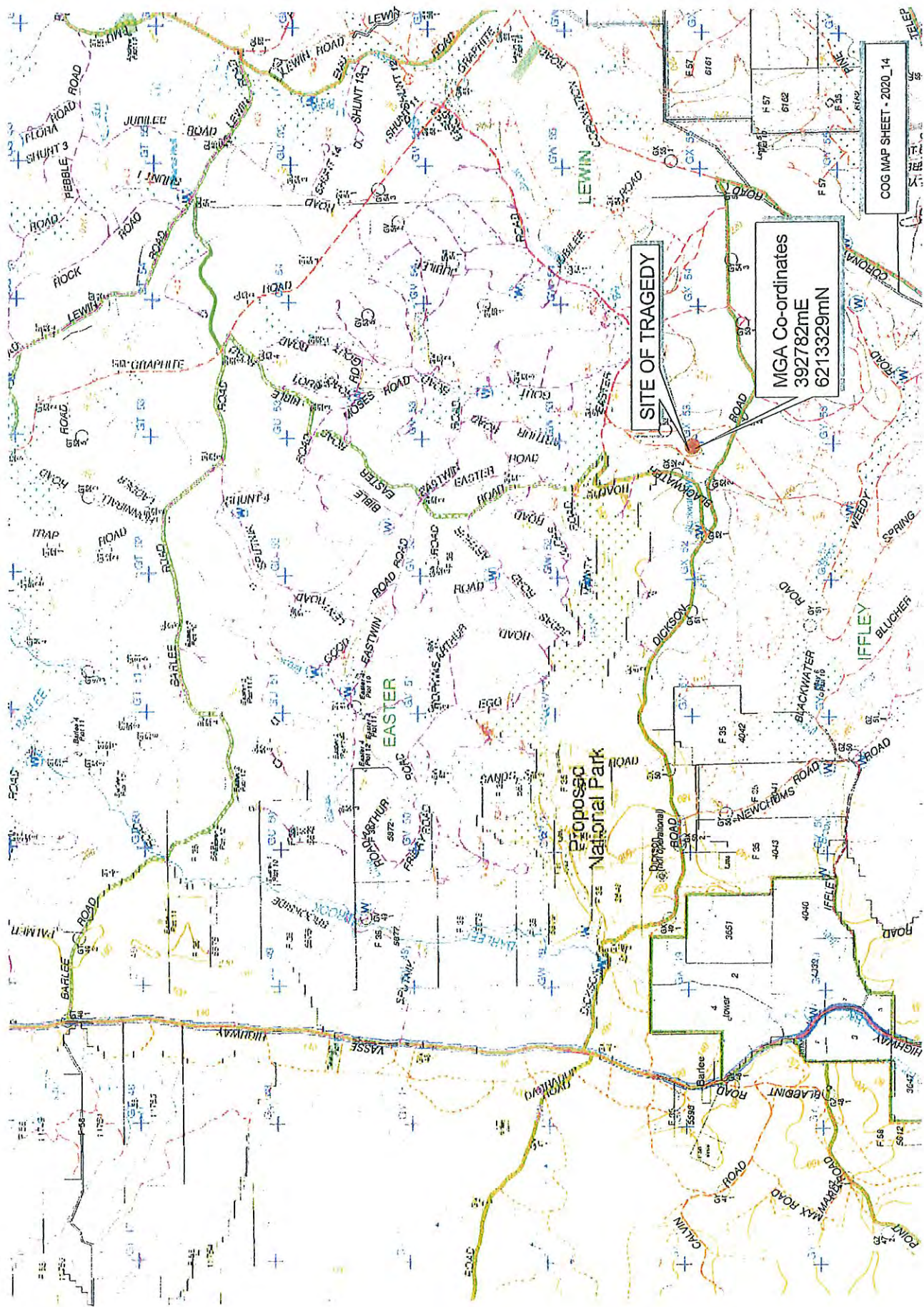
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NANUP FIRE - 2-1-58

Sc 2/e 1" = 20 ch.

~~seen~~ 2:15 pm
spot fire - 3





DURS/PS

8th January, 1958.

STEWART

Detective Sergeant Sullivan,
C.I.B.,
Police Department,
P E R T H.

As requested I attach herewith a report covering the death by fire of four men in the Nannup District on Thursday.

ics.

As verbally requested, I arranged with Nannup office to furnish to the Nannup Police Station -

- (a) An '80' scale map of the fire locality indicating the progress of the fire, and wind directions.
- (b) A 20 chains to one inch tracing of the area of the tragedy.

[Signature]
REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT.

1579/57

AJM:PM.
COMO.

7th January, 1958.

MILESI.

Det. Sgt. Sullivan,
Criminal Investigation Bureau,
PERTH.

Easter Block Fire 1-3 January 1958

H'th

I forward herewith a summary of the events prior to and during the recent fire in Easter and Iffley Blocks as promised.

Plans of the main fire area, and large scale plan of the area where the men were killed, together with a report of their actions prior to the tragedy will come forward within the next day or so.

FIRE CONTROL SUPERINTENDENT.

[Signature]

(1)

EASTER BLOCK FIRE -- 1st -- 3rd JANUARY, 1958.

It is customary for the Department to carry out an "advance burn" over country about to be worked by a sawmill, prior to the commencement of logging operations.

The object of this burn is to remove the scrub and heavy leaf litter to make it easier for the fallers to work, and to reduce the fuel bed, in case a fire should be started accidentally by the bush workers in the course of their operations.

Such a fire, in dangerous weather conditions, could, of course, have disastrous results.

Such a burn was carried out on 2nd December, 1957, over an area of approximately 400 acres in Easter Block, bounded by Hopkins road on the north, Easter road on the east, Dickson road on the south, and Sands road on the west.

This burn was patrolled on 3rd and 4th December and was considered safe.

It was known that the burn was only round the edges of the area, to a depth varying from a few chains to nearly a mile, and that there was unburned forest in the centre of the Block.

In a normal year, this unburned country would have been burnt out piecemeal under favourable conditions later in the season.

However, as bad fire weather continued, and the Minister prohibited all lighting of fires in the open, under Section 21 of the Bush Fires Act, it was considered wise not to do any further burning in the area until after the first Autumn rains.

On the morning of 11th December, the towers reported a small smoke in the south-west corner of the area, where there was known to be a pocket of unburned Karri scrub. The smoke did not develop.

On the morning of the 12th December another small smoke, which died out, was reported from the same general area.

No further smokes were sighted from the area until 1115 hours on 1st January 1958, despite the fact that there is a lookout tower only a mile from the area.

On 26th December, 5 points of rain were registered at Nannup, followed by 35 points on the 28th, and a further 3 points on the 30th.

At 1115 hours on 1st January 1958, a small white smoke was reported at the centre of the northern portion of the area, approximately half a mile south of Hopkins road.

(2)
The hazard forecast was High Summer, with north-east to south-east winds, veering southerly during the day, indicating a cool moist afternoon and evening.

It being a holiday, no regular gangs were available, but a man and a youth were sent out to investigate, and report back to Nannup.

At 2 p.m. this patrol reported that the fire was small in area, approximately 2 acres, but burning freely.

The available men at Willow Springs, then an overseer and six men and a youth, under Assistant Forester J. Talbot were instructed to proceed to the fire to bring it under control during the evening and night.

No difficulties were anticipated as the weather was not severe, and the area was surrounded by burned country.

The 4.15 p.m. forecast for next day was much the same as for the 1st, with the expectation of a south-easterly in the afternoon. All the country to the north and north-west of the fire was well burnt, and would hold it.

However this gang experienced considerable difficulty in getting in to the fire and at 7 p.m. Talbot reported that they would need more men and a dozer to assist them.

The gang carried on with suppressive measures, but as usual in this country the fire died out to a great extent at night and when it became impossible to find the fire face in the darkness they pulled out to rest till first light next day.

At 2 a.m. on Thursday 2nd January, they were joined by the Barlee Brook gang, and the two gangs began work on the fire at first light, approximately 4.30 a.m.

These two gangs made good progress with the fire in rough going, but by 6 a.m. it became obvious that the fire was beginning to move strongly and at 8.15 Talbot reported that he had not surrounded the fire, and needed more men.

The forecast for the day, given at 7.45 a.m. was slightly higher than the previous two days, but still with the promise of an afternoon sea breeze.

Forester Pears arrived at the fire at approximately 9 a.m. and took charge; the Glenoran gang and a dozer were on the way to the fire.

At this time the area of the fire, as fixed by tower bearings, was approximately 100 acres.

Pears decided that no good purpose would be served by trying to attack the fire face, as the fire was beginning to lift badly, and the work would probably be wasted anyway.

16
(3)

In anticipation of the forecasted afternoon sea breeze he elected to wait for the fire on Dickson road and Easter road, and burn back against the fire when the time was opportune, making use of previously burnt country to help hold the fire.

To effect this move, he put the gangs on to raking clean the fire line on the outside of the five chain break north and west from the junction of Easter road and Dickson road.

This was a wise move and normally would almost certainly have succeeded.

However, what Pears did not know, was that the forecast was wrong and that instead of a sea breeze, a "front" was approaching the fire area and it^{was} probably even then too late to do anything to hold the fire on Dickson and Easter roads.

Just before 2 p.m. the raking was completed and a start was made with the counter firing.

About this time, probably between 2.15 and 2.40 p.m. the "front" passed over the area, and as is usual in these circumstances, the fire "exploded" racing ahead of a half gale and throwing burning debris ahead to start up spot fires ahead of the main head of fire. The furthest spot fire occurred approximately 8 miles south-south-east of the point where the main fire crossed Dickson road and 5 miles south-east of the most southerly point of the final fire face.

It was at this time that the fire victims were engulfed and died.

generic cut
Details of this tragedy are the subject of a separate report, but the main cause of it was the fact that as the front approached the fire zone the head fire had reached the steep, heavily fuelled Easter Brook, running east-west across Easter Road, and the funnel effect of this valley caused an upsurge of the fire towards the east and across Easter road.

The main head fire, travelling south-south-east cut across Dickson road and divided the gang, who were spread out along this road, into two sections.

There were two members of the gang to the west of the fire, and safe, and eight members cut off on the east side of the break through.

Two of these raced through the head fire to safety while the remaining six took the logical escape route to the north-east along Easter road.

However this route had been cut by the freak spur of fire that had raced up Easter Brook and the only remaining route was to the south-east between the two tongues of fire.

After the break through, all gangs were withdrawn from the fire to rest and prepare to take steps to contain the fire as conditions improved following the break out.

This is the normal procedure under these conditions, and work began again on the fire-face at 10 p.m. on the Thursday, continued all night and by 8.25 a.m. on Friday 3rd of January, the fire was reported under control.

Patrol and mop-up proceeded along normal lines through Saturday, Sunday and Monday and is continuing.

On Sunday morning an attempt was made to locate the site of the origin of the fire as pin pointed by the towers to ascertain, if possible, the actual cause.

origin of fire

Approximately at the point of origin, some 40 chains south of Hopkins road there was found a small karri swamp area with a spring of water at the head of a gully. There was evidence to show that this area had been lightly burned over by the advance burn of December 2nd, but since it was cool and damp the litter had not been burned down to mineral soil, but there remained a heavy layer of duff which had dried out after being exposed by the removal of the top layer and some covering scrub by the advance burn.

On this area there was standing an old punky karri stag some 35 ft. high at the base of which was a deep bed of recent ashes, some 20 ft. long, leading to a still burning punky log which was obviously the top section of the still standing stag.

There was evidence on the ground that a very light fire had crept around in this swampy area since the original burn and on the edge of the swamp there was a steep spur that had burned very hotly in the new fire.

From all the evidence on the spot it is a reasonable assumption that this old dead karri was smouldering in a punk pocket some 35 ft. from the ground and eventually the fire so weakened the tree that the top fell out.

The break up of the top on striking the ground, incidentally it struck and up-rooted a green tree in its path, thus roughly establishing the time of fall, stirred up the fire in the log and ignited the drying leaf litter in which it lay.

This fire slowly spread until it in turn ignited the litter on the surrounding unburned forest, giving rise to the main fire, detected at 11.15 a.m. on morning of January 1st.

9.3
MRS. J. WILTSHIRE-BUTLER
C/- MR. HERALD
PALMARUP MILL

THE
FORESTS
EXPRESSING
AND
RECENT

CONSERVATOR
DEPARTMENT
TO
DEEP
SAD

AND
JOIN
YOU
SYMPATHY
BEREAVEMENT

STAFF
ME
MY
IN

OF THE
IN
REAL
YOUR

H. E. GRAHAM
MINISTER FOR FORESTS.

per DS

6/1/58
CAC:EGV

Hush Of Tragedy Over Willow Springs

THE Forestry department settlement of Willow Springs was almost deserted today.

The widows and 16 children of the four men burnt to death had gone to stay with relatives and friends in Manjimup and Nannup.

Residents who stayed did not want to discuss the tragedy.

Men's voices thickened when they told of the fire that swept through tall timber about 20 miles from Nannup on Thursday.

Funeral arrangements have not been finalised.

Tentative arrangements are that John Francis Wiltshire-Butler (37), and Robert Johnston (30), will be buried in Manjimup tomorrow.

Jan Hilliger (37), and George Henry (Snow) McCorkill (64), will be buried in Nannup late today.

Distress was not confined to the Willow Springs settlement.

Dance Cancelled

Soon after hearing of the tragedy, the Nannup Road Board cancelled a public farewell and dance to Agent-General E. K. Hoar, former MLA for the district.

A few cars and trucks arrived in the town for the dance but when the cancellation was known the people quietly returned to their homes.

The plight of the 16 orphaned children is the concern of all in Nannup.

Groups of businessmen and the RSL are discussing how they could best assist the dependants of the men. The RSL is particularly interested in the problems of Mrs. Wiltshire-Butler.

Her husband served overseas in the AIF during World War II. She has eight children under 12.

Wiltshire-Butler's pensioner father, John Edwin Wiltshire-Butler (64), arrived at Willow Springs at 5.30 a.m. today to take Mrs. Wiltshire-Butler and her children to her sister-in-law at Paigarp.

Fate Hits At 5

DUTCHMAN Jan Hilliger (37)—one of four forestry workers burnt to death in the Nannup bushfire—had been on the job only three months.

When he walked into the Dutch Consulate in September to notify of a change of address, he had been out of work some time.

He was almost ready to give up hope for a job to keep his wife Cornelia (34) and his four children aged 12, 10, 5 and 1.

"That job with the Forestry Department saved his pride and faith," said a Consulate spokesman today. "He was so glad to get it and to him his future seemed assured."

Sick Child

Mrs. Hilliger, who was in Perth to see one of her four children who is seriously ill, returned to Nannup last night.

The Hilligers came from Holland in 1955.

The Consulate spokesman could not say what would be done to help Mrs. Hilliger and her four children.

"But from previous cases here the Government has provided generously for such families left in a tight corner," he said.

Inquiry Likely

GOVERNMENT investigations are likely into the Willow Springs fire tragedy.

Forestry Department regional superintendent D. Stewart and fire control superintendent A. J. Milesi are in Nannup to gather information on the fire.

At 4 a.m. today department employees inspected the blaze and it now appears to be under control.

But it would be impossible to forecast whether the blaze would flare again, Stewart said today.

If weather conditions remained cool it was unlikely that there would be further trouble.

25 3/1/58

Friday, 3rd Jan: 1958

FOUR DIE TRAPPED IN S-W FIRE; 3 ESCAPE

FOUR Forestry Department workers were burnt to death near Nannup yesterday afternoon.

Three other forestry men narrowly escaped as they fled before a wall of flames.

Teen children have been left fatherless. One of the victims, aged 47, was the father of eight children under the age of 12.

Another man (30) had three children under six years. A third (37) had four children under 12. Names of the victims—three of them married men—will be released when their relatives have been told the grim news.

The fourth victim (62) was single. He had had six years' service with the Forestry Department. The three survivors had worked for the department for one year or less.

The seven were a gang of workmen stationed at Willow Springs, a tiny Forestry Department settlement in thick bush 18 miles south-east of Nannup, about 170 miles from Perth.

DRIVEN BY FLAMES

The overseer and six men went to the wide-front fire in the Nannup area and were assisted by local volunteers.

The Willow Springs men were taking a break on the edge of the fire when apparently the wind turned and drove the flames at them.

They dropped their tools and ran. The overseer and two of the men managed to reach the safety of a nearby road.

The men had scattered as they ran, and when the flames reached the road there was no sign of the others.

Thick black smoke enveloped the scene and the men panicked that their mates had reached safety points. When they did not turn up, the Nannup office was told by radio telephone.

Later today the bodies of the four men were found close to the area where the fire had been burning. The bodies are being taken to Perth.

The Forestry Department camp at Willow Springs was set up in the early 1940s. It was built on a site with a view of headquarters at Nannup.

The camp was destroyed by the fire. The bodies of the four men were found close to the area where the fire had been burning. The bodies are being taken to Perth.

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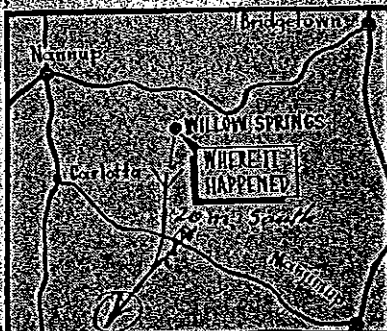
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Disaster Area



Map shows the south-west timber country where four men were burnt to death yesterday.

Mr Stewart } 25 7-1-58.
for your
Mr. Leslie } information.

6/1/58

WARNING ALL

Humidity between 90 and 95 per cent. close to saturation point for several hours. That is a warning.

The Weather Bureau says we're in for a lot more of it.

At 10 a.m. the mercury showed 80 deg., reduced by 2 deg. to 78.5 at noon. But the humidity stuck at an uncomfortable 65 per cent.

Things are expected to cool off a little by Sunday. Water Cuts: Sprinklers and fixed hoses must not be used between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. in the metropolitan area except between Canning Bridge and Medina.



When John Robert Butler, 33, was killed in the forest, he was with his group of friends who were walking through the forest. But Butler was not the first man who died.

Nannup grieves for its dead

From a Staff Reporter

NANNUP Sat.—The shadow of death hung over the idyllic of little huts in the forestry hamlet of Willow Springs today.

Of the 100 huts, many were closed doors of homes where tragedy struck today. And the people who were left gathered mostly in the two homes. The children, all un- known to each other, had been left in the hands of the two women who showed in their saddened eyes the shock

of the tragedy that had swept this little hamlet. They saw Mrs. John Wiltshire Butler and her eight children taken to stay with relatives at Palgarup.

Widow's grief

They saw Mrs. Robert Johnston, close to collapse in her grief, go to relatives at Yambian. They knew that Mrs. Cornelia Hilliger, who had taken one of her children to Perth to hospital, had rushed back to Nannup when she learned of the tragedy.

Nine men had left Willow Springs on the Wednesday afternoon to fight the fire. Two others joined them next day.

Four had not come back. And in this tiny community their deaths were as death in one family.

Dutch widow

Today in Nannup, I talked to Mrs. Cornelia Hilliger, the widow of Dutchman Jan Hilliger. Her 12-year-old son, blond-haired William, was with her.

Their eyes were red and swollen but Mrs. Hilliger's face was controlled as she spoke. She told me she had gone to Perth to take her four-year-old son, Johannes, to Princess Margaret Hospital where he will be a patient for three months.

A few weeks before she had brought her young baby to Perth for medical treatment.

It was while in Perth with Johannes she learned of the death of her husband.

"My children love Australia but now I must go back to my people in Holland. I have no relatives here," she said.

• Mrs. Cornelia Hilliger, who was in Perth at the time of the tragedy, with her 12-year-old son William. Mrs. Hilliger had brought her 4-year-old son to hospital, but rushed back to Nannup after hearing the news of her husband's death.



...on Thursday. Three of the four men were married and they had 16 children under 12.

The Sunday Times £250 will head a Statewide appeal to assist the stricken families. The cheque will come from Timeswords Trust Account.

SAD BURIAL SCENE AT FIRE TOWN

From a staff reporter

NANNUP, Sat.: Two of the four men who died in the fierce forest fire at Easterblock, near Nannup, on Thursday were followed to their graves today by all the men from the little timber hamlet of Willow Springs, by scores of the men of Nannup.

Many in the tightly massed crowd were in shirt sleeves.

Forestry workers, timber millers, mates of the dead men stood silently beside the graves in Nannup cemetery.

Most had come for the funeral of George Henry "Snow" McCorkhill, a popular local man.

Van Hilliger, the Dutchman, had not been long in the district and was not so well known. But the bond of comradeship that the fourfold tragedy had forged brought to his graveside many who had not known him in life.

The funerals were separate. Hilliger's first, then McCorkhill's.

Many in the crowd wore black bands.

Mrs. Hilliger was at her husband's funeral, the stricken widow supported by two women friends.

Death run

Earlier in the day I had walked over the death course the four men had taken as they ran from the flames.

With Chief Fire Control Officer A. J. Miles, local forestry men, Nannup constable Ken Johnson and two survivors of the tragedy, Kevin Barrett and Jim Vallentine — the two who had raced to safety just ahead of the four who died — I went out to Easterblock 20 miles from Nannup, the scene of the tragedy.

Great trees were blackened, the high scrub

ravaged by the flames, a carpet of grey ash everywhere.

We could see where the men had been fighting the fires.

We could see where the fire had raced towards them and they had to run.

We found their charred rakes they had dropped as they ran with the great wall of flame behind them.

And then we saw where the four men had fallen huddled under a red gum tree — and died.

Kevin Barrett, who had raced just ahead of them from the flames and had

reached the safety of the road, stood beside me at the end of the death run.

They must have died from the smoke and exhaustion before the flames quite reached them, he told me.

Yesterday at Manjimup another of the fire victims, Robert Johnston, was buried. The fourth man, John Francis Wiltshire Butler, will be buried at Manjimup this afternoon.

Det.-Sgt. J. Sullivan, of Perth C.I.B., has been sent to Nannup to inquire into the four deaths.

• Continued on P. 3

Four Men Die In Grim Race With Bushfire

(FROM PETER FINN)

NANNUP, Fri.—Four forestry workers were burnt to death 15 miles from here yesterday afternoon as they tried desperately to escape from a fire blazing out of control on a four-mile front.

This is one of the worst bushfire tragedies in West Australian history.

Two other forestry workers, running barely 80 yards in front of their fellows, reached safety after a 2½-mile dash.

The dead men were:

John Francis, Wiltshire-Butler (37), married with eight children.

Jan Hilliger (37), married with four children.

Robert Johnston (30), married with four children.

George Henry (Snow) McCrone (64), single.

All six children are all under 12 years of age.

All the men and their families lived in the hamlet of Willow Springs, 17 miles from Nannup.

Surging into a sudden fury on New Year's Day the bushfire at Easterblock, south-east of Nannup, swept through karri and red gum trees between 100 and 120 feet tall.

Smouldering

It apparently started from a smouldering tree that had been left burning when a nearby area was burnt off by forestry officers about two months ago.

At 3 p.m. on Wednesday five men from Willow Springs, Raymond Thomas (22); James McCrone (30); William Rising (30); Kevin Joseph Barrett (25); assistant forester John Talbot (54), his son John and three of the dead men left to fight the fire.

They were joined yesterday by James Sutherland Valentine (33) and Robert O'Donnell (30).

Barrett and Valentine were the only survivors of the party of six who fought the blaze together.

With torn clothes and a blackened face Barrett today told the story of the five-day battle against the fire.

He said: "We set up a base at a junction of two gravel roads on Wednesday and attacked the fire with rakes and slashers to try and cut a fire break."

Leaping Fire

"We worked through Wednesday night and flames leapt from tree-top to tree-top and the fire raced out of control."

"We worked in groups of three and four and at that

stage the fire was on a two-mile front."

Barrett said the forestry workers tried to cut away low scrub near the intersection of Easter-road and Dixon-road, in an effort to confine the fire to an area of about ten square miles.

During the first night it jumped both roads and the men were kept hard at work alternately retreating and fighting.

Barrett continued: "After a few hours' rest we were at it again at 4 a.m. yesterday (Thursday)."

"The fire by this time had taken a firm grip and we found that most of us had to retreat to Easter-road and try to make a five-chain fire break."

At 10.30 a.m. yesterday the original nine men were joined by Valentine and Johnston who answered their call for aid.

Barrett said the fire continued to move yesterday mainly in an easterly direction.

Early in the afternoon the fire jumped the five-chain fire break and, as Barrett said: "The only thing we could do was run."

Arm Wound Poses A Mystery

A man with a deep gash in his left arm which appeared to be a knife wound staggered into his home in Subiaco last night and collapsed as he told his wife to call an ambulance.

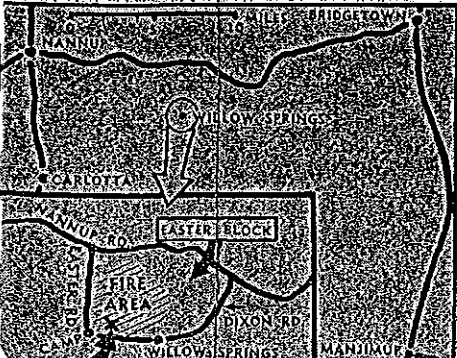
Frank O'Donnell (30), a laundressman of Leveque-street, Subiaco, was admitted to the Royal Perth Hospital with spinal injuries, multiple bruises and a lacerated arm.

He could not explain to his wife where he had been or what had happened to him. His clothes were covered in blood.

The police are attempting to find out whether he was injured in an accident or was involved in a brawl.

He is known to have been at a city hotel earlier in the night.

Haggard and unshaven, forestry worker Kevin Barrett (25), one of the survivors of the Nannup bushfire, has a meal after his ordeal. He fought the fire for 46 hours with little rest. Barrett and James Valentine were the only survivors of the group of six trapped by the fire.—From Our Mobile Picturegram Unit.





000045F0102



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT

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|--|--------------------------------|
| FILE NUMBER 000045F0102 | TITLE PROTECTION 10000 |
| TITLE | |
| FIRE PROTECTION< ADMINISTRATION< NANNUP FIRE APPEAL< < VOLUME 1< | |
| TEXT PROTECTION 10000 | CREATION DATE 1:01:1958 |
| CLASSIFICATION 0102 | DESTRUCTION CODE KEEP |
| LOCATION DRY BOX 925 | |
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| STATE RECORDS OFFICE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA | | | |
| ARCHIVES LOAN SLIP | | | 1256 |
| Date Requested 22/1/4 | Request Received by FAX | Agency Conservation | Date Due 22/2/4 |
| Acc or Cons No. 5927 | File/Item No. 45F0102 | Year V1 | Location |
| Box No. | | | |
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| Retrieved by PD | Date | Conditions of Loan Records to be returned within 28 days unless extension of loan is granted by the State Records Office of Western Australia | |
| Already on Loan/Reserve for | | Agency Contact | |
| Remarks | | | |

FORESTS DEPARTMENT

Nannup

To Conservator of Forests,
Forests Department,
Perth.

15th December 1958
Western Australia

Reference-H.O.

Local 10/1.

SUBJECT: MEMORIAL to EASTER BLOCK FIRE VICTIMS.

1, Attention Mr Stewart.

18.12.58.

A quote has been received for construction, labour only, of the above, for the sum of twenty pounds.

Approval is sought to accept this quote.

AR. Hill

A.D.F.O.

ARH/MAL.

approved

DS
19/12/58

C.C. Accounts

To note

Mr. Hill
27/1/59

Forests Department,

P E R T H.

3rd July, 1958.

Dear Sir,

Nannup Fire Appeal.

The above appeal has now closed with the following amount collected by this Department -

| | |
|--|----------------|
| Forests Department Staff | £1,025. 13. 3. |
| Sawmillers and Staff | £1,058. 5. 6. |
| Other Government Departments (State and Commonwealth) | £1,427. 1. 11. |
| Other | 759. 1. 7. |
| | <hr/> |
| | £4,270. 2. 3. |
| | <hr/> |

Due to the excellent response to our circulars, the appeal has been very successful, and the future welfare of the widows and children of the unfortunate victims of this tragedy, assured.

I wish to thank you and your staff most sincerely for your excellent and generous co-operation.

Yours faithfully,

A. G. Harris
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

NANNUP FIRE:

Widow Grateful For Assistance

GRATITUDE for help she had received from many quarters was expressed yesterday by Mrs. Wiltshire-Butler, whose husband was one of four forestry workers killed in the Nannup bush-fire last month.

Mrs. Butler has moved into a State Housing Commission home at Bayswater with her eight children, aged one to 11.

"I do not think there is any country in the world where people would help as wholeheartedly as they have done here," Mrs. Butler said yesterday.

Strangers as well as friends had been kind and helpful since the tragedy, she said. Five of her children had started school at Bayswater.

She was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and met her husband, John Francis Wiltshire-Butler who was serving with the R.A.A.F., through the Australian Club in Alexandria.

Handwritten: 26/2/58

ACH:EGV

36.
17th January, 1958.

Mr. R. Monkhouse,
The Editor,
"Manjimup-Warren Times,"
MANJIMUP. W.A.

Dear Sir,

It is noted in your issue of the 8th January, that a Relief Fund has been started at Manjimup for the widows and children of the Nannup Bushfire victims. Efforts are being made to form a joint committee to amalgamate all funds, and appoint trustees. Until this is done it is suggested that you would be wise to hold the money collected. If, however, you wish to pass it on, the Forests Department is prepared to receive it, issue receipts and make acknowledgments. So far the Forests Department has in hand more than \$1,000. and expects that much more will still be received, as a result of circularising all sawmill organisations, Government Departments, and all field staff of the Forests Department.

To date the Head Office staff of the Forests Department has donated more than £200.

Yours faithfully,

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

MANJIMUP OPENS FUND FOR DEPENDANTS OF BUSHFIRE VICTIMS

The wave of horror which swept Nannup on Thursday afternoon last, when four forestry workers were burnt to death as they tried to escape from a bush fire blazing out of control on a four-mile front, extended to Manjimup.

Sympathy immediately went out to the three widows and 16 children left fatherless.

Two of the victims were buried in Manjimup.

Robert Johnston (30), married, with four children, was interred in the Manjimup cemetery on Saturday afternoon.

John Francis Wiltshire Butler (37), married father of eight children, was a trainee tobacco grower from Manjimup who farmed a block at Northcliffe for several seasons.

Then he worked at the Kauri Timber Company's mill in Northcliffe before shifting to Willow Springs.

At the funeral on Sunday afternoon at Manjimup members of the local R.S.L. formed a guard of honour and Mr. Alf Fry sounded the Last Post and Reveille.

At the request of prominent Warren Times has consented citizens the "Manjimup" to act as a receiving agent for donations towards the Widows' Relief Fund opened in Manjimup.

The day it opened £23/10/- was subscribed, donated by

the following:

R. T. and A. W. Wheatley, Bridgetown, £10/10/-; Sympathy, £5; J. and Coy., Bridgetown, £6; J. J. Johnston, Manjimup, £1; R. Monkhouse, Manjimup £1.

BOARD DOESN'T WANT PRIVATE WORKS

Manjimup Road Board is keen to leave private works to private enterprise.

It has decided that, after present obligations have been met, it will not carry out any further private works, with the exception of grading, which must have the approval of the board.

Where the board's plant is used on private works the following scale of charges operate: TD9 dozer £3 per hour, trucks 30/- per hour, grader £40 and Fordson 45/- per hour, cat 12 grader 70/- per hour.

Recent purchases, the 212 grader charge was fixed at 60/- per hour and the new D6 dozer at 90/- per hour.

M. Warren Times. 8 Jan

20

BUSHFIRE DEATH SEQUEL.

STATE 4/1/58. (MJT):

SLEE: COSTELLO.

THE FORESTS DEPARTMENT IN PERTH HAS ASSUMED THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PROVIDING FOR IMMEDIATE NEEDS OF THE WIDOWS AND SIXTEEN YOUNG CHILDREN OF THE THREE MEN BURNT TO DEATH IN A BUSHFIRE NEAR NANNUP ON THURSDAY.

A FOURTH MAN WHO LOST HIS LIFE IN THE FIRE HAD NO FAMILY.

ALL OF THE MEN WERE FORESTS DEPARTMENT EMPLOYEES.

TWO OF THE MEN WERE BURIED TODAY AT NANNUP. THE OTHER TWO WILL BE BURIED TOMORROW -- ONE AT MANJIMUP AND ONE AT NANNUP.

THE CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS, MR. HARRIS, SAID THIS AFTERNOON THAT HE FELT SURE OFFICERS OF THE DEPARTMENT WOULD SUBSCRIBE PRIVATELY TO A FUND FOR THE FAMILIES WHICH WAS STARTED TODAY BY THE AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' UNION IN PERTH.

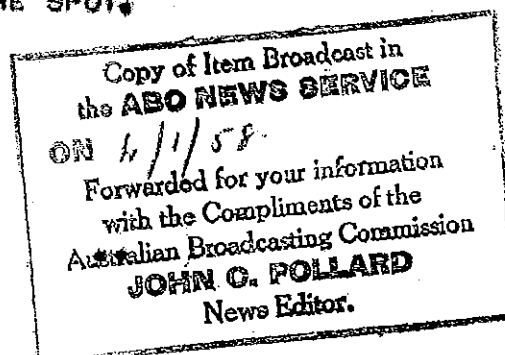
19.

-2-

MEANWHILE, THE SOUTHERN SUPERINTENDENT OF THE DEPARTMENT, MR. STEWART AND THE CHIEF FIRE CONTROL OFFICER, MR. MILES, (MILLESY) ARE IN NANNUP TO INVESTIGATE THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SULLIVAN OF THE C.I.B. IS ALSO MAKING INVESTIGATIONS ON THE SPOT.

(17)



34
B

They Died For Their Country

THOSE four victims of the South-West bush-fires died fighting for this country as surely as any soldiers in a war.

The people of the district have rallied around the widows and children, as bush people do, and Forest Commissioner Alan Harris has announced that his department will be responsible for their immediate welfare.

But it should, and I hope will, go further than that in this generous State.

The children of the victims should not be less well looked after than those of men who died in wartime battles.

These men were fighting one of our most ferocious and destructive natural enemies, doing their dangerous duty with all the courage anybody could expect of a soldier.

Apart from whatever pensions and compensations the families get, a trust, committee, or suitable Government department should keep an eye on those kids until they are out in the world and working for themselves.

They've got many years ahead before then, and what can happen to big, fatherless families hit by hard times is dreadful.

BUSHFIRE APPEAL

PUBLIC support was not long in coming for the families of the four Willow Springs bushfire victims.

Australian Workers' Union organiser Jack Walsh today started an appeal with a donation of £5. He asked that donations be sent to the AWU office in James-st.

Jarraahwood timber workers telephoned Nannup today to offer £20 to get a fund started. Within two hours £40 had been raised.

Conservator of Forests Harris today urged that financial assistance be given to the victims' families, who include a widow with eight children.

Hush of Tragedy Over Town: Page 3, Col. 1.

85
8/1/58
ABN

FIRE VICTIMS TO GET AID

Appeals have started in several centres for the families of four forestry workers who died in a bushfire at Willow Springs last Thursday.

And yesterday C. H. Golding, State secretary of the W.A. branch of the Australian Workers' Union announced a branch donation of £250.

The Nannup Road Board has opened a State-wide appeal for the widows and 16 children—all the children are under 12—and the members have constituted themselves as an appeal committee to receive donations.

The Bank of New South Wales at Nannup will act as bankers and cheques or money orders can be sent direct to the bank.

The Forests Department is to hold a drive for funds among its staff and Forests Conservator A. C. Harris said yesterday that the Department and the A.W.U. would probably amalgamate for

an appeal committee and set up a trust account.

Harris added that the routine departmental inquiry into the fire had been completed and a report was being prepared.

Midland Mayor W. S. Doney has given £10/10/ and a number of firms and private individuals have told the A.W.U. that they intend to make gifts.

An appeal started at Bridgetown yesterday morning and the newsagency of Rotarian A. Blackhurst is the receiving depot for money or gifts.

A local appeal has also been opened by the Colliery branch of the Australian Labor Party.

The Bunbury Speed Boat Club at races on Sunday raised £54 for the families.

H. Wallace p.p. 7.1.58



006654F2006



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT

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| FILE NUMBER | 006654F2006 | TITLE PROTECTION | 10000 |
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| COMMITTEES AND CONFERENCES | | | |
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| NANNUP FIRE APPEAL COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATION OF FUNDS | | | |
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| TEXT PROTECTION | 10000 | CREATION DATE | 010158 |
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| Already on Loan/Reserve for | | Agency Contact | |
| Remarks | | | |

252/58 KGH:EW
Mr. Hide

OFFICER IN CHARGE,
FORESTS DEPARTMENT,
NANNUP

MAINTENANCE OF GRAVES - J. HILLIGER AND G. McCORKILL

Following my discussion with you on the occasion of my visit on 17 March, I wish to confirm my instruction that the Forests Department continue to take an active interest in maintaining the graves of Messrs. J.R. Hilliger and G.E. McCorkill in the Nannup cemetery.

It is to be the responsibility of your Division to ensure that these graves are given regular attention to maintain them in a presentable condition.

These two men died tragically in the service of the Forests Department and it must remain as our public responsibility to be seen to care for the visible memorials to this service.


CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS

20th March 1981

Copy - SUPERINTENDENT - CENTRAL REGION.



252/58 KGH:EW
Mr. Hide

OFFICER IN CHARGE,
FORESTS DEPARTMENT,
MANJIMUP

MAINTENANCE OF GRAVES - R.H. JOHNSTON AND J.W. BUTLER

During a recent visit to Nannup I was surprised to find that an instruction issued in 1960 relating to the regular maintenance of the graves of the four men killed in a bush fire in Nannup Division of 2 January 1958, did not appear to be on record at the Nannup office.

I have now re-issued my previous direction that the Forests Department shall continue to ensure that the graves at Nannup be given regular attention.


As two of the victims are buried at Manjimup it will likewise continue to be the responsibility of the Manjimup Division to ensure that regular attention is given to maintaining the graves of Messrs. Johnston and Butler at the local cemetery.

These men died tragically in the service of the Forests Department and it must remain as our public responsibility to be seen to care for the visible memorials to this service.


CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS

20th March 1981

COPY TO - SUPERINTENDENT - SOUTHERN REGION
- SUPERINTENDENT - CENTRAL REGION



DWRS:PP

121
28th March, 1960.

Stewart.

Mrs. J. Wiltshire-Butler,
107 Wood Street,
INGLEWOOD, W.A.

Dear Madam,

Grave of the Late J.E. Wiltshire-Butler.

Following Mr. Stewart's discussion with you last week, I have to confirm that arrangements have been made with the Karrakatta Monumental Works for completion of the four graves to the same design, as indicated by Mr. Stewart in the catalogue.

The lettering on the marble tablet will be as was agreed upon with Mr. Stewart.

The Forests Department will continue to take an interest in these graves and will ensure that they receive regular maintenance at least once per annum.

Yours faithfully,

acth
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

Mr. M.C. Merson,
Karrakatta Monumental Works,
KARRAKATTA, W.A.

For your information. As discussed with Mr. Stewart.

acth
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

29 MAR 1960

ESB:EGV

85
252/58

20th April, 1959.

Budd

Mrs. P. Wiltshire-Butler,
35 Francis Street,
BASSENDEN.

Dear Mrs. Wiltshire-Butler,

Nannup Bush Fire Memorial.

Further to my letter of the 15th instant and your telephonic message of even date to Mr. Budd, I have to inform you that other arrangements have been made for the transport of one of the families and it will now be possible to take your 2 eldest boys in addition to yourself. The car will call at your address at 8.15 a.m. on Sunday morning.

Owing to the distances to be travelled I regret that it will not be possible to make a visit to Manjimup.

Yours sincerely,

MR. STEWART:

CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS.

I understand that you will arrange for Mrs. Hilliger and her son to travel in the car with you and the representative of the Dutch Consul.

See also p. 1/2

22/4/59

53

20/20

NANNUP BUSHFIRE APPEAL FUND COMMITTEE.

C/- A.W.U.
17 James Street,
PERTH..W.A.

29.7.58

Conservator of Forests,
Forestry Department,
PERTH.....W.A.

Dear Sir,

The abovenamed Appeal has now closed and Press Statements to this effect have been published.

The Committee has requested that I express its gratitude for the assistance which your Department rendered to the Appeal. The total amount raised being £8,636-2-6.

The respective amounts apportioned to the three families concerned has been paid over to Trusteeships which the Committee set up for the purpose of satisfactorily administering the monies in the best interests of the families.

Once again thanking your Department for its assistance in this Appeal.

Yours faithfully,

.....
SECRETARY - TREASURER
NANNUP BUSHFIRE APPEAL FUND.

Committee file

ABH 31/7

1
K2

Mr. Stenhouse

sup

revenue

20/7/58

24/7/58

DS

P 40

DRAFT. - Statement for press

*21 C.H.I. - Copies sent to chairman, A. Stocker
to Hon Sec. C. Golding
for comment, & passing on.*

NANNUP FIRE APPEAL COMMITTEE.

The Committee which was formed under the requirements of the Charitable Collections Act for control and administration of monies subscribed to the above Appeal, announces that although the fund officially closed on March 30th, further amounts were received to bring the grand total of subscriptions to £8,579.6.10.

It will be remembered that following the tragic death of four forestry employees at a bush fire in Nannup district on the 2nd January, three married men left three widows and sixteen children. There was an immediate and most generous response from the public and money was subscribed for the relief of the bereaved families from all parts of the State.

The Committee desires to express its thanks and that of the families concerned for the most generous response of all donors and for the valuable contribution of the many voluntary workers who gave freely of their time in connection with the Appeal.

The Committee has decided that the funds as subscribed would be allocated to the three families concerned in the ratio of 4:3:3 thus providing a greater sum for the large family with eight children.

Steps are being taken for the appointment of trustees for each family to ensure that the monies are used to the best advantage in accordance with the following principles -

1. That they be applied in such manner that there will be no reduction in current benefits from State and Commonwealth Governments.
2. That every assistance be given to the widow and children until each child passes school leaving age and is established in remunerative employment.
3. That any residue be used for the benefit of the widow and that such sum as is left after the education of the children should pass to her.

The trustees will be -

For Mrs. Wiltshire Butler - Perth Legacy Inc.

For Mrs. Hilliger - The Consul for the Netherlands
and the Conservator of Forests.

For Mrs. Johnston - The Zone 4 President of the
Association of Apex Clubs and
the Secretary of the Australian
Workers' Union.

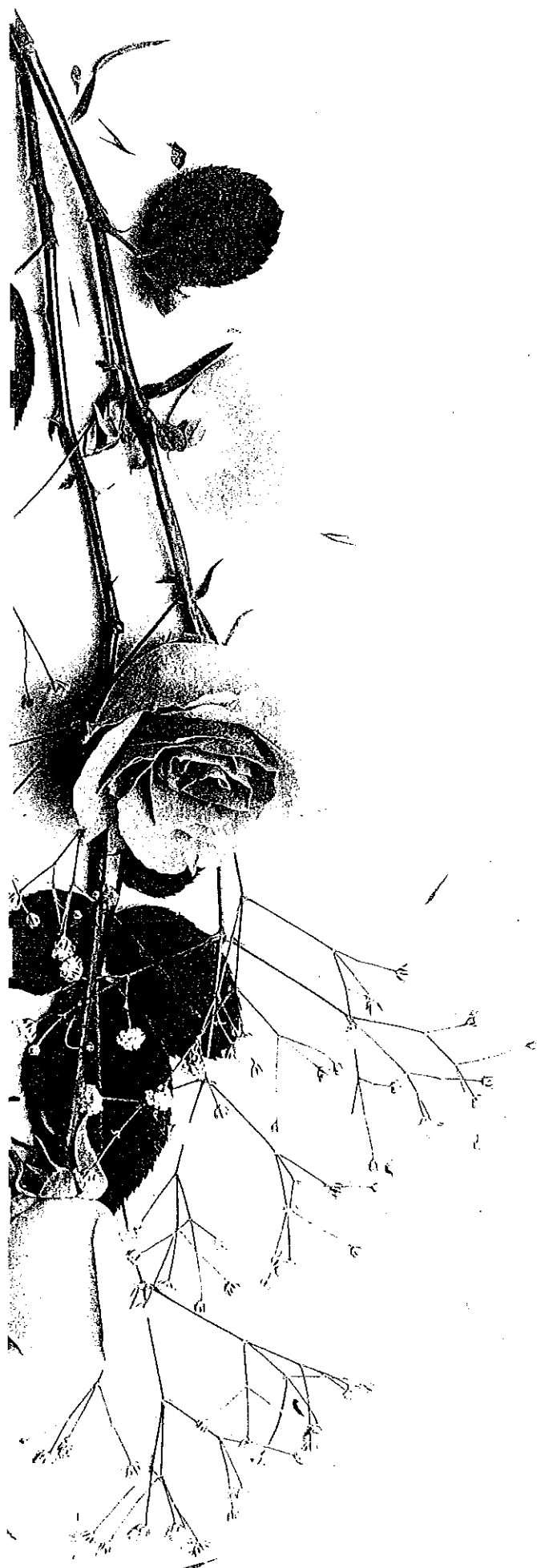
This means that each group of trustees will now be in
a position to administer the monies available to the best
advantage for the widow and family concerned and will keep close-
ly in touch with the family and its requirements.

Thanks to the generosity of the many sympathetic
citizens who have contributed to this fund it should be possible
for sixteen young Australians to complete their education without
any financial disadvantage and for the bereaved widows to raise
their families without any undue financial worries.

Sighted by Conservator. 17/6/68

16/6/58.
DWRS/PS.

9.40



IN LOVING MEMORY OF

JOHN F. WILSHIRE BUTLER

DEARLY BELOVED HUSBAND & FATHER
PERISHED IN NANNUP BUSH FIRE
2ND JAN. 1958.
AGED 37 YEARS.

+

LOVING & TREASURED MEMORIES OF
YEARS WE SHARED TOGETHER